

Goodbye Otherworld,

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Illust
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See You Tomorrow

III

The Traveled Path
and the Box of Hope



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Goodbye Otherworld,
See you Tomorrow.

Prologue — Standing in the Sky-Gray Rain

“Man, I wish we had a map. Then we wouldn’t be lost,” I commented.

“Can you get maps easily in your world? Ones with even the small roads on them?” Nito replied from the back seat.

“Easily? Well, pretty much everyone has one.”

After all, you’d be able to find one in minutes on your phone.

“It’s peaceful there, then,” Nito marveled quietly.

Describing my world as being at peace felt a little off to me. It was just the norm for me. I did find it hard to dispute that description in comparison to this world, though. Everything else aside, this world was already in ruins. A strange phenomenon called mana collapse had started to swallow up everything—trees, earth, plants, animals, even people—and turn it all into white crystals. It was still happening even now, and as far as the eye could see the landscape looked like white sand dunes.

I’d been flung into this situation, and my only option had been to load up my steam-powered vehicle—I’d named it the Kettle—with food and other essentials and just keep traveling. I’d been like a lost child wandering around in search of something familiar. No matter how far the child goes, though, there’s nothing to be found, and sooner or later they’ll collapse in exhaustion, with nothing left to do but cry.

Then one day I’d met a girl, and finally managed to become something more than a lost child. I’d gained a destination—an objective—and before long we’d found ourselves on a journey together. Ruins though the world was, we still met survivors from time to time. Each time, they’d entrusted me with something of theirs, so now I took on the role of a peddler as we continued on our journey. We could have a bit of a chat, laugh together, or share a meal. We stood shoulder to shoulder between our hope for tomorrow and the sky and wilderness of this uncertain world.

I looked into the rearview mirror to see Nito's clear blue eyes looking back at me. Her pointed ears, peeking out through her long white hair, were proof that she was part of a mysterious race called half-elves.

"Maps were highly classified before the collapse," she explained. "If you made one that showed even the smallest roads, then opposing countries would use them for military plans."

The idea felt utterly alien to me. Maps were such an everyday thing for me that I didn't know how to react to being told that they were classified material.

"Doesn't that make things difficult, though?" I asked. "You know, for traveling and such."

"People didn't travel far enough that they'd need a map. They used trains instead."

"So maps weren't necessary in the first place, then..."

"I think there would have been local maps which showed the roads everyone in the region knew. I just assume that the country controlled collated records that had detailed information for a wide region."

"That's a real shame. I want Google Maps back."

"Google?"

"It's a magic spell that can tell you anything."

"You had magic in your world too?"

"Something like that," I replied.

I sometimes had to fudge the details like this when we ran up against questions where our worldviews and ideas of common sense clashed, and I didn't particularly enjoy doing so.

"We're going to struggle finding those places in your mom's notebook without a map."

Nito had set out on her journey in order to find the places painted in her mother's notebook. Her mother had told her countless tales of a place called the Golden Sea which she'd visited during her own journeys when she was

younger, as Nito hadn't been able to leave her room because of her illness. It was supposed to be the most beautiful place ever, and while it might not actually be a sight found in this world, it was the place most precious to Nito—a land promised to her by her mother.

She had found some of the other places that were painted within the notebook's pages, so it seemed like following the paintings would lead us to the Golden Sea. The problem was that there were no notes of where the places had been found, and with no satnav or map, it was difficult to find them, let alone get to them.

"I guess normal people couldn't get hold of maps if they were kept so classified."

"I think simple ones of the region would be doable, in libraries or the feudal lords' mansions... Hmm, I hadn't thought of this," Nito mused, the sight of her pressing her pencil into her lips reflected in the mirror.

"So let's look for a town, go to the library, and look for a map there."

"Right. Even a rough map should let us know where towns are and where we can resupply."

"You sound like a fine traveler to me," I praised.

"Don't I just?" she said with a smug chuckle, before starting to hum a slightly out-of-tune version of a song from my world. I always had my phone playing music in the car when I could, so she must have learned one of the tunes she liked.

The scenery outside the windows remained constant for quite a while, but eventually, the road started to descend and wind into curves. The rain showed no sign of stopping—just kept falling endlessly with varying intensity. It was daytime, but the entire sky was covered in gray clouds. If the car had been silent too, then we'd have quickly grown depressed. The pop music coming from my phone cheered us up, though.

Eventually, we left the mountains and the road suddenly widened. Nito normally would have said something, but she was awfully quiet. I glanced back to see her with her sketchbook resting on her chest and her pencil still between

her fingers, breathing steadily in her sleep. I turned the volume down and decided to be extra careful while driving.

Before long, our surroundings changed from simple wilderness to land maintained by people. Green fields that looked like rice paddies stood to either side of us, but over half of the area had dissolved into white sand. Farther down the now-straight road, I could see a lump of blue and black. My eyesight wasn't great, so the main thing I could see was the patch of color resting on top of the darkened ocher of the ground rather than any actual outline or features.

When we finally got close enough for me to make it out more clearly, I was honestly shocked. In the distance was a person wearing an overcoat. They were standing in the rain at the crossroads, looking up at a rusted sign. The figure's main feature was a newsboy cap with cat ears sticking up on each side. A big three-wheeled vehicle stood at their side, looking to me like this world's version of a motorcycle.

I stopped a little ways in front of them, now able to see that it was a girl. She looked my way, water dripping steadily off the brim of her hat.

"Hi there," I said, winding the window down.

She just inclined her head slightly. Her hair was an ocean blue and was plastered to her cheek. From her appearance, I'd have guessed she was around the same age as me. She offered no reply other than the nod. I assumed she must have been wary of me, but her composed posture and air of belonging didn't fit with that, which just confused me all the more.

I glanced at the motorcycle next to her. Most vehicles in this world used steam power, and this one looked like it was no exception. I'd only ever seen standard four-wheeled ones back in the town, though, so this was a fresh sight for me. It had a seat in the middle and handlebars like a bike, with a unique body composed of two wheels at the front, on an axle in a T-shaped arrangement with the steering column, and a single wheel at the back. It was about the same size as a car too, so it was pretty imposing. I was sure that there was a specific name for this kind of motorcycle.

"A buggy?" I mused to myself after some thought.

"Do you mean my trike?" she asked.

“Ah, that’s it!” I exclaimed, clapping my hands together and feeling much more energetic all of a sudden. “It’s so cool.”

“It is? Thank you,” she answered, glancing at the trike before returning her gaze to me. She spared a glance at the luggage on the roof rack as she added, “Are you traveling? Or maybe making deliveries?”

“Traveling, I guess. I’m also doing a bit of peddling.”

“I see. Do you have books?”

Books, she asks. The only ones that came to mind were Nito’s notebook and the recipe collection we’d gotten from Vandyke, but those were both individuals’ personal books. I was certain that wasn’t what the girl wanted.

“Unfortunately not. What kind of books are you looking for?”

“Stories,” she answered shortly.

She seemed to have nothing more to say and retook her seat on the trike. Water cascaded off the hem of her blue caped coat, soaking her shoes and legs, but she didn’t seem to care as she leaned forward to grab the handlebars. I could tell that the conversation was over and that she was leaving.

“Take care, then,” I said after a moment.

“I will. Farewell.”

The engine must have already been hot, because the trike immediately started to move with a high-pitched hiss. I watched as it sped up, and her figure soon vanished into the haze of the rain.

I looked over toward where she’d been standing and noticed something strange. Everywhere around us, the ground had darkened from taking in the rainwater, but the ground where she’d been standing hadn’t done so as much. Even taking into account that the trike could have blocked the rain, its shelter wouldn’t have formed a perfect circle. It was almost like there had been an umbrella or something keeping the ground around her dry.

“She didn’t have anything with her though...” I murmured.

Something else was bothering me too. The Kettle was piled high with luggage. The steam engine needed mana stones as fuel and a large amount of water.

Plus, we had food and clothes for us along with other necessities for the journey. These supplies became all the more important for longer distances. Yet that girl had only had the single bag over her shoulder. She was way too lightly equipped, and it left me bemused even now.

I was puzzled. She'd had amazingly little with her, the ground wasn't completely soaked where she'd been standing, and she was looking for stories. I had so many questions. It wasn't like I could chase after her, though, so I just put my hands back on the wheel, feeling bewildered.

[Keisuke's Notes] The Golden Sea

It's the most beautiful place ever, and somewhere that might or might not actually exist in this world. For Nito, it's a land that embodies her promise with her mother. It's also the reason she can keep moving forward in this uncertain world. The only clue we've got is her notebook, but I'm sure it's out there somewhere.

Chapter 1 — Ruby Red, Hidden in the Bag

1

“Amazing, huh?”

“It really is.”

Our exchange was somewhat lacking in terms of vocabulary, but only because the sight before us had robbed us of the ability to say anything more articulate.

We were standing in a rural village looking up at a structure with listing, hand-built stone walls. Putting it nicely, I might have called it a pastoral tableau, while being more merciless would have meant describing it as a massive building out in the boonies. It was more majestic than a church and more peaceful than a castle, so the best word I could think of for it was “temple.”

Gray stains from weathering streaked the walls, and the glass windows on the second floor had some broken panels. The villagers might have gathered here and crowded into the building during its past, but now there was no sign of that and the place felt more like a ruin than anything. Even so, it still had an air of holiness to it like a temple would, and it held our gazes, refusing to let go.

At some point, Nito’s shoulders had started to shake. Her silver hair shone in the sunlight and also seemed to tremble, while her pointed ears, poking through the curtain of her hair, started to twitch. I could easily guess what she would do next.

Sure enough, she turned on her heel and raced back to the Kettle to open the back door. She swung her bag of art materials onto her back and fetched out the easel lying in the footwell. She tottered her way around with her arms wrapped around the easel, and once she’d picked a good spot she put it down and opened it up, her eyes sparkling as she looked up at the temple.

At this point, there’d be no stopping her no matter what I said. She was going to be fixated on her painting. She’d frequently had me stop and set up her easel

when she saw some view that caught her eye.

“I’m heading in,” I called to her, just in case, but she didn’t reply, just kept holding her pencil while looking between her sketchbook and the temple.

Shrugging, I made my way up the temple’s stone stairs. A pair of tall doors shut off the entrance, but they weren’t locked. I looked inside as I pushed them open, the hinges squealing. Rows of pews lined the huge room inside. A statue of a woman holding a staff stood at the far end where you could easily look up at it, with colorful glass decorating the walls around it. It occurred to me that Nito would probably be pretty happy about this room as well.

Outside, it felt like summer was on its way, but the interior of the temple was almost unpleasantly cold. It was like the silent stillness had frozen the very air itself.

A red carpet led from the entrance straight to the statue. Many people must have walked that path before, as the carpet was dirtied from heavy foot traffic. I followed it up to the statue, which was probably of the saint I’d heard about before. She must have been part of this world’s faith and religion, but I didn’t know the details. Everyone seemed to venerate her existence though.

Once I got closer, I saw there were three steps up to the statue, with a multitude of candles lining them. I doubted anyone was around to light them anymore.

Suddenly, something caught my attention. I held my breath and strained my ears.

I hadn’t misheard—there was the sound again. Faint noises were coming from behind the door on the left. Someone must be here.

I wasn’t entirely sure whether to investigate. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have needed to worry, but hearing strange noises in some remote village in this ruined world put me on edge. It wasn’t specifically fear, but more an awareness of not being able to make assumptions about what the noises might be. I’d decided not to bother, and I was idly scratching my cheek when the door opened behind me.

A shaft of vivid light slipped its way inside and I turned around. I’d first

thought it was Nito coming in, but the person standing there was actually a slightly stooped old woman. She looked steadily at me from the entrance before eventually walking forward without a word, a wooden bucket dangling from her hand. She was heading straight for me.

“Um, hello there,” I greeted hesitantly.

The woman came to a stop in front of me and simply said one word.

“Move.”

“Ah, sorry,” I said, stepping aside.

She put the bucket in the space I’d vacated. The water filling it to the brim sloshed around inside it. She knelt and took a cloth from its rim, dunking it in the water and then wringing it out.

“Is the half-elf girl who’s painting out front with you?” she asked.

“Ah, yes, she is.”

“She didn’t respond to anything I said. What are you doing all the way out here?”

“We’re traveling. We followed the road through the forest and saw the temple once we’d cleared it.”

She didn’t spare me a glance as she set about using the cloth to wipe the candlesticks. I stood there at a loss, watching. I didn’t know what to do about the unnatural silence that had fallen over us. I might have been getting in the way of her cleaning as it was, and not everyone needed conversation or contact with people.

“Do you have time?” she asked suddenly, and when I quickly answered that I did, she flicked her eyes toward me. “Go get that stepladder, then.”

She’d indicated a corridor off to the right. Resting in the corner was a wooden stepladder. I picked it up and came back, setting it up next to the statue where she’d gestured. She dunked and wrung another cloth, offering it to me.

“I can’t climb it anymore, so I can’t reach,” she told me.

“Right...”

I took it, and she returned to the candlesticks. I opened up the damp cloth and looked up at the statue, then at the stepladder that was about my height. I'd never thought I'd end up cleaning in a temple in an entirely separate world. I laughed, stepping up onto the ladder.

The statue was polished stone, shockingly smooth to the touch. Even the wrinkles in the saint's clothes were carved with exquisite detail, though, so a simple once-over with my wet cloth wasn't enough to get it clean. It was probably my personality that had me working carefully at it despite how much effort it seemed it would take. I'd always been a bit of a fastidious one.

Once I'd spent the time to wipe all the dust off, the statue seemed even shinier than it had before. I descended the ladder, satisfied at my accomplishment. When I turned around, I could see the woman was wiping down the pews. I thought for a few moments, the cloth still in hand, before washing it out in the bucket and starting on the opposite set of pews. She must have come here regularly, as there wasn't a very thick layer of dust on them. A quick wipe with the damp cloth was enough to get them clean.

By the time I finished the last of them and headed back, the woman was sitting on the front pew. She patted the seat next to her when she noticed me, and I hesitantly sat as she'd asked.

"You were a real help, thanks. The saint is happy too."

"Really?" I asked. "She looks pretty expressionless to me."

"I'm just looking at her and thinking that to myself. She's a statue, so she's never going to look any different."

I nodded in understanding, looking up at her statue. I couldn't say that it didn't feel somewhat like she was smiling.

"You're not from this world, are you?" the woman asked suddenly.

I practically leaped up in shock; my expression must have been pretty dumbstruck as I looked at her. She didn't laugh, though, instead looking at me with an expression that was just as unreadable as the saint's.

"How can you tell?" I asked eventually. "Is there a sign on my back?"

She gave a soft snort at my joke and just pointed at my shoes.

“Those aren’t from this world. The materials and manufacturing are both obviously different from the ones here.”

I looked down. The shoes were indeed from my world. They were light and sturdy, suitable for mountain climbing, so they’d been pretty expensive.

“You know your shoes, huh?”

“Of course. It’s my job. I don’t know exactly what kind of place your world was, but your shoes tell me it was affluent.”

I nodded vaguely. Compared to this world, it certainly was. More advanced too. Also, it wasn’t in ruins.

“Do you come here often, ma’am?”

“Every day. There’s nowhere else I have to go, and I would feel bad leaving the saint to languish.”

I didn’t know whether it was piety or just her wanting to continue a familiar routine. The woman bent forward and the sun lit her face up in profile as she looked up at the statue. Eventually, she brought her hands together in front of her chest and softly cast her eyes down.

I wasn’t really familiar with religion or prayer. I knew that it wasn’t something I should interfere with, though, and I could assume that this time was important to the woman, so I left her to it.

“Are you staying the night?” she asked bluntly once she’d finished her prayers.

I checked my watch. It would be evening in no time. I was still tired from driving and didn’t feel like heading off anywhere else.

“I think so, yes.”

“You can sleep here then,” she replied calmly.

It almost seemed like a joke to me, but she wasn’t laughing, and she didn’t seem like the type to joke around either.

“In the temple?” I asked after a minute.

“Did you see some other hut out there?”

“Well, I didn’t see an inn at least.”

“The only people that come here are coming for the temple. There are rooms inside for them.”

“Oh, I see. Then I’ll accept your...”

As I spoke, I looked up at the statue and trailed off. The whole place felt mysterious. The entirety of the high-ceilinged temple had an air to it which I still wasn’t used to. An obvious worry came to mind.

“There’s nothing to be scared of at night here, right?” I asked.

She looked at me, bemused.

“What would there be in a place like this?”

I couldn’t do anything but offer a vague agreement when asked in such a straightforward way. This vague, ominous fear was obviously lacking any real cause. I’d never seen any ghosts or anything in this world either.

“We’ll be stopping here, then, yeah.”

I considered setting the tent up in the village, but I slept in the tent every night and wouldn’t have minded a solid roof over my head and some calm sleep from time to time, and I certainly wasn’t going to say no to a soft bed. If I could crawl into a bed, it didn’t matter whether it was in an inn or just an uninhabited temple.

“Be careful with your fire,” she told me, picking up the bucket and leaving.

To me, encounters between survivors in this ruined world were things to be treasured, but this woman seemed completely at ease with it all. It felt like I’d just chatted with someone while waiting for a bus on a Saturday, I reflected, as the woman left the temple.

2

I waited with Nito until she finished painting, then we headed into the temple together. By then, the sun was starting to set. We headed through the main hall

into the corridor at the side. Four doors led off of it, and a quick check of the closest two revealed bedrooms behind each.

Since night was beginning to fall, we wouldn't be able to rely on light from the windows to see our way around, either in the corridor or in the rooms. I was long since used to sleeping in clearings out in the mountains or even on wide-open plains, but I didn't think I'd ever get used to sleeping in abandoned buildings. The remnants of people's lives had seeped into spaces like this, even if they weren't visible, and it always made me vaguely uneasy. Even using the flashlight on my phone, I could still see shadows lurking farther down the corridor and in the corners of the room we were currently looking into.

"What do you want to do?"

I directed the question over my shoulder to Nito. She gave me a conflicted look in return.

"What do you mean?"

"Why does your face look so stiff?" I asked.

"It's not stiff in the slightest," she answered, and if she hadn't been gripping her easel so tightly, it might have been more convincing.

"There's a few rooms to choose from. I was asking which you liked the look of."

"Like?" she muttered, looking around and peeking into the room in front of us, then looking up at me and repeating, louder, "Like?"

"You can give me disbelieving looks all you want, but there are beds here, see?"

I shined the light into the room to reveal a full (albeit fairly plain) set of furniture. There were two beds, a writing desk under the window, and a two-seater sofa with a round coffee table.

"So," I continued, "you can have this room, and I'll take the one next door."

She glared into the room, still clutching her easel.

"You're telling me to sleep in here?" she asked pointedly.

“Yeah?”

“Alone? In this dark room?”

Despite her grumbling, she refused to use the word “scary.”

“I’ll leave the lamp with you.”

“That’s not the problem.”

“Then maybe I should sleep in here with you?”

“But, um, t-they’re next to each other,” she stuttered, pointing at the beds and the fairly small space separating the two of them.

“Well, there’s one each, then.”

“Obviously! What do you think you’re talking about?!”



Considering her age, I didn't feel like sharing a room would be much of an issue, but with her being a girl, maybe I was wrong. Even if it didn't bother me, as long as it bothered her, it was still a problem.

"Yeah, I guess I didn't think things through enough. I'll be next door, then."

"Ah, no," she said, shaking her head.

The faint light from my phone fell onto the wall behind her, and the pale shadow of her hair shook in time with the movement of her head.

"It's not like I'm against it! And, um, it'd be better if we're in the same room. There's no helping it."

"There's no helping it?"

"D-Doesn't it bother you?" she asked, glancing up at me.

"I'm just fine with it...?" I said, trailing off questioningly.

She grumbled and hunched her shoulders.

"Then I'm completely fine with it too. Completely, utterly *fine*."

She pointedly refused to meet my gaze as she walked past me and dumped her things on the bed closest to the door. She put her easel between the beds and even set up her sketchbook on it.

"The other side of this border is your territory. This side is mine. We'll have a non-aggression pact. Okay?"

"Well, that was a quick territorial dispute."

"I may be a small nation, but I will protect my lands with my life. My soldiers are strong."

"I don't think I'd like what'd happen if I invaded thoughtlessly. I'll take care."

"A wise decision," she stated, looking at me like a stray cat on its guard.

Under her wary gaze, I put my things on my own bed. Either because the room had been shut up or because it hadn't been left empty for very long, there wasn't any dust on the bed. I sat down and sank into the mattress. Even the bedding was smooth under my hands. Clean, safe, and soft. *Beds are such*

wonderful things, I thought, letting myself fall back.

All the familiar sensations of tent sleeping—the rough rocks digging into my back, the damp, the chill—were completely absent. The bed gently enveloped me in softness. Was it stuffed with down, maybe? I closed my eyes to savor the feeling and my body suddenly remembered how tired I was. My eyelids were so heavy that I couldn't open them again. As I lay there, I vaguely heard Nito speak.

"Keisuke?"

"Let's have the negotiations later," I managed. "My soldiers are on vacation."

"So you're sleepy?"

"Hardly... We're open all hours here."

"You're already sleep talking. Go to sleep."

"What a kind neighboring country I have... Here's the light."

I held out my phone without opening my eyes and felt a small hand take it from me.

3

When I next opened my eyes, Nito was just in sight. She was crouched like a sneaking cat and holding the lit-up phone in one hand. Her other hand was reaching toward my shoulder. Her eyes were wide in fear.

"What's up?" I asked once I'd grasped the situation.

"Keisuke...there's a gh-gh-gh..."

"A 'gh'?"

She opened and closed her mouth several times, swallowing her words as if she was afraid to even say them.

"There's a ghost, it looks like."

"Oh... Right. Say hi for me. I'm still sleepy."

I rolled over and put my arm under my head, intending to go back to sleep,

but the blows soon raining down on my back meant that that was never going to happen.

“What do you mean, ‘say hi’?! I-It’s a ghost! Now’s not the time to sleep!”

“Fine, fine. I give in. I’m getting up.”

The drowsiness was still muffling my mind as I sat up and stretched. Eventually, I woke up properly. Nito’s face was lit from beneath by the phone, which she’d abandoned on the bed, and she looked close to tears. I got myself properly seated, facing her.

“What happened, then?” I asked.

“I-I heard something. A *slam* and then a *creeeaaak*...”

“Are you sure you weren’t imagining things?”

She shook her head wildly from side to side.

“It happened several times. That’s why I woke you up... It sounds like it’s stopped now, though.”

“Maybe one of the windows is open and it’s the wind... Oh.”

In the middle of trotting out the usual suspects, I remembered something.

“What’s that look supposed to mean...?”

“I heard something too.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?!”

“Well, the old woman showed up while I was thinking about it, and then I forgot.”

“The old woman?! There’s a ghost of an old woman here?!”

“Nah, she was a real woman... It’s too much of a pain to explain it all.”

Nito must have been so focused on her painting that she hadn’t noticed when the woman went past, or even when she spoke to her.

“Anyway,” I said decisively, “I heard something, and you heard something...so maybe there *is* something here.”

Nito’s expression shifted to one of abject terror, and she went utterly still.

“We need to get out of here. Now,” she said.

“It’s not necessarily a ghost...”

“I...don’t want to meet that ghost lady.”

“Seriously, she was still alive.”

Nito didn’t want to hear it, though, and just started shaking her head. I couldn’t exactly leave her like that and go back to sleep.

“Want me to go look?” I asked eventually.

Her expression morphed into one of shock, like she wanted to say, “I can’t believe you! Don’t you know what could happen?!”

“I didn’t think your brain was *that* empty...”

“Well, that was five times worse than what I thought you’d say.”

I was scared too, obviously. Fortunately, I was still half-asleep, so I wasn’t really feeling it. Sleepiness was stronger than fear. I picked up my backpack from the floor and took out a windup lamp. The room was suddenly much brighter once I’d switched it on.

“You going to wait here?” I asked.

“You want to leave me on my own?!”

“You may as well come with me, then,” I said, standing up.

Though she pouted and frowned as she did so, Nito followed suit.

“What do we do if there *is* something?” she asked.

“I’ll keep it busy, and you’ll run away.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” she insisted.

Her voice was stronger than I’d expected, and I turned to look at her properly. She still had a look of fear on her face, but her lips were drawn into a firm, determined line.

“W-We’ll die together!”

“That’s not really funny,” I said, laughing all the same; I didn’t think we’d need to worry *that* much.

I opened the door and peered out into the corridor. A shaft of moonlight from one of the windows cut a line across the wall and floor. I strained my ears, but there was nothing to hear.

“S-So?” Nito asked.

“Well, I can’t hear anything...” I answered, before turning to look at her. “You’re bringing that with you?”

“It’s for self-defense,” she insisted, clutching her easel in both hands.

I just nodded wordlessly. *As long as it makes her more comfortable.*

We moved through the door and into the corridor. To the left was the path to the temple hall, and to the right, the path to the unknown. The sound we’d heard had probably come from the latter direction.

“A-Are we really going?”

“Well, there’s that saying about how ghosts are actually silver grass.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know when you think you see a ghost at night, then you go up and look and it turns out to be just withered, silvery grass?”

“Oh, so it means you can’t make out the details and your imagination fills them in, making you see something impossible...”

“There you go, just casually showing off how clever you are.”

“And what is that supp—”

Suddenly, she stopped. I held my breath as well. We met each other’s gazes and then both slowly turned our heads to the right.

Slam.

“I heard that.”

“So did I,” she replied.

The sound didn’t repeat, though. I decided that waiting in that spot trying to breathe as quietly as possible wouldn’t be any help, so I started walking. A moment later, Nito followed after me at a trot. We found a single door at the

end of the corridor. I stopped outside it and waited, but there was nothing to hear.

I reached for the doorknob. Nito grabbed onto the hem of my shirt. The door opened with a soft creak, and a dim, yellow light that felt like it came from a retro-style lamp shone through from the other side. Behind the door was a library. Shelves of books lined the walls and a large table and chairs stood in the center of the room.

Someone was sitting in one of those chairs.

My eyes widened. This was no ghost, but she was a familiar face.

The girl in the chair looked up and met my gaze. The lantern beside her lit up her cheeks and the characteristic cat-eared hat she wore. When I'd first met her, she'd seemed like the type who usually wore a pretty blank expression, but even she had wide eyes at this sudden intrusion.

"Good evening," I ventured.

Nito, behind me, pulled at the back of my shirt.

"T-There's someone there?! Or is it *something*?!"

She sounded rather interested considering how scared she'd been before.

"What a coincidence," the girl replied, her expression having already evened out.

"Well, she's not a ghost," I said over my shoulder.

"So...it's a person? If she's here so late at night...is it that old woman?!"

I leaned to the side and Nito poked her head timidly around me, still using me to shield herself.

"Ah, g-good evening..." Nito mumbled.

"Good evening, indeed," the girl answered.

Nito took a few steps back and then looked up at me in utter relief.

"It was just a girl! Thank goodness!" she added.

"You're fine with it as long as it's a girl?"

She just looked blankly back at me. *I mean, all right, then.*

Now that we knew the noises weren't from a ghost, we'd be able to go back to sleep easily enough. Just poking our heads in, saying hi, and then closing the door would have made us look like the suspicious ones, though, and we couldn't have that. I hesitated for a moment longer, then stepped into the room.

The air inside had the slight mustiness of old paper. It reminded me of the smell of the old dictionaries and history books in the school library. The girl didn't make any move to stop me, just went back to looking down at the book lying open on the table. A pile of other books sat next to it.

"You're here to read books?" I asked.

"That's right. Small villages like this always gather their books in the church."

"You're looking for a story, right?" I asked, remembering our conversation in the rain.

She closed the book and added it to the top of her pile.

"There're only history books and scriptures here, though."

She stood up and went over to one of the bookshelves, pulling out several books and setting them down on the table. She must have been working her way through them in order.

"You can't have read them all?"

"I've just glanced through them," she answered, flipping through the pages of one of the books.

Well, that certainly wasn't reading, but she did sometimes stop and cast her eyes across a page. Doing that for all the books in the room would definitely be more than a little effort.

Nito had hesitantly entered the room as we spoke and now she poked me in the side.

"Do you know her?"

"Oh yeah, you were asleep. I met her on the road, after we got out of the

mountains.”

Nito nodded in understanding. She looked at the bookshelves, then at the girl flipping through the books on the table, seeming almost jealous. Nito had spent her entire childhood bedridden. Her only pastimes had been reading and painting. While painting could be done anywhere as long as you had the right materials, carrying lots of books with you everywhere was difficult. Her bookworm blood was probably stirring now that she was surrounded by so many books again.

“Nito, why do you think we’re here?”

She looked back at me in puzzlement.

“That’s right. We’re here to look for a map,” I continued. “We’ll definitely need a map for our journey, so I want to check for one in this library.”

Her face quickly brightened, and she nodded eagerly.

“You’ve got the right girl for the job! I’ll check them all!”

She dithered for a moment, looking for somewhere to put her easel. I held out my hand and she immediately passed it over. The lantern was the only thing left in her hands as she headed over to the bookshelves on the wall and inspected the spines. She seemed happy enough that I wouldn’t have been surprised to hear her start to hum.

A faint laugh reached my ears. The girl was looking at Nito with a soft expression. She soon averted her gaze, but I felt a kindred spirit in her all the same. Nito carried the book she’d chosen with both hands and went for the seat opposite the other girl. There was only one table in the room, and only four chairs around it.

“Um, do you mind if I sit here?” she asked.

“Go ahead. You’re more than welcome.”

Her voice was much softer than it had been when she’d spoken to me. Nito seemed to notice that as well; she wasn’t nervous as she sat down and opened her book. She would probably be engrossed in its pages for a while.

A glance at my watch showed the hands approaching our usual dinnertime. I

must have been napping for longer than I'd thought. Even my stomach had been sleepy, so I hadn't realized before, but as I rubbed it absently, I noticed that I was pretty hungry. I went back to our room and put the easel down, exchanging it for my backpack, then headed back down the corridor. I opened the library door and sat down a ways out of the room. This way I wouldn't be using any fire near the books, but I could still keep an eye on Nito.

Out came the utensils and cans. I used my phone's flashlight to check the cans' labels. Though I couldn't actually read the words, I could recognize the symbols well enough to distinguish between the cans—sort of an “Oh, yeah, I've had that one before” type of thing. I picked out what I'd be using and stacked those ones to the side, putting the rest back into my bag.

I lit the burner on the Svea and listened to its intermittent popping. The flame stabilized once the tank of mana stones that fueled it had warmed up. It sputtered slightly but I ignored that and put the frying pan atop the burner, drizzling in some oil.

I emptied two cans of beans into the pan. They were red in color, but pretty similar in taste and size to edamame, so they were easy for me to work with. The bubbling sound of the oil and the fragrance of the beans frying filled the corridor outside the quiet library. Next, I opened a cylindrical can containing something along the lines of tomato sauce. I dolloped that into the pan and mixed the beans through it. Once I'd added in some seasoning and let it stew, it would be ready to go.

The last can was stuffed full of bread. Canned bread had no water content, so it was extremely dense. I was still glad to be able to keep this staple food in my diet, though. I wouldn't have been able to make it myself, after all. I cut up the log-like loaf on a wooden chopping board. Taking the pan off the heat, I dished it out into bowls and got spoons ready. It was a simple meal, the kind of thing we had every day. I got up and walked over to the table in the library.

“Nito, dinner's ready,” I said, once I was standing next to her.

I got no response. She was the same way when she was painting: once she got into something, she was *really* into it. I did what I always did, shaking her shoulder. She looked up at me in surprise.

“W-What is it?”

“Dinner’s ready. You’re probably hungry.”

She stretched to look around me and saw the meal I’d prepared. Her face brightened.

“I am, actually,” she said as if just realizing it. “Thank you.”

She gently closed the book she’d been looking at and stood up, then stopped as if a thought had suddenly occurred to her. She had her left index finger in her right hand and she was tugging at it. I’d realized lately that this was a habit of hers when she was feeling unsure or was struggling to say something. She glanced up at me and then flicked her eyes toward the girl before looking back up at me. I wanted to laugh at her obvious hesitance, but I just nodded back to her instead. Her long, pointed ears twitched with conviction as she turned to face the girl again. After taking a moment to prepare herself, she spoke.

“Excuse me.”

The girl looked up and seemed almost taken aback at the enthusiasm written clearly on Nito’s face.

“W-Would you like to eat with us?” Nito asked.

The other girl soon realized what was going on, and her lips curved into a smile.

“Oh, you’re inviting me?” she asked.

“Um, if it’s not a bother, then yes.”

“It’s not a bother at all. Thank you.”

Nito breathed a “thank goodness” as all the tension unwound from her body, and then she smiled happily.

“Then, um, come this way,” she said, walking over to the makeshift dining area on the floor outside the door.

The other girl stood and gave me a questioning look as she passed. Somehow, I could tell she was asking if she’d be in the way.

“Well, I made extra just for this.”

“You’re both far too kind,” she told me with a smile before sitting down next to Nito.

I sat down across from them and we tucked into our modest meal. It was the same flavors we’d had a thousand times, but Nito still smiled and declared the food delicious. It was also nice to watch her eat her fill. She was still a growing girl, after all.

The bread was so dry that just folding over one of the thin slices I’d cut would have been enough to snap it in half. If you tried to eat it plain, it would suck up all the saliva in your mouth and dry it out, so instead we spread a thin layer of the bean and tomato stew over each slice. That increased the moisture content, softening the bread enough to bend it into a bowl shape that could hold another spoonful. Once we’d done that, we could fold it over and bite into the resulting sandwich.

As we ate, I noted the bread’s strong wheat-flour aroma and its firm texture under my teeth. The surface was still parched, but the center had absorbed the moisture from the stew and become chewy. It reminded me of pizza dough, and it went perfectly with the saltiness of the beans and the bittersweet taste of the tomatoes.

The bread had vanished in moments and then all we had left was a thin soup. It was actually a broth made of the same powdered stock I used for stews, but Nito and I often dissolved the stock in hot water and ate it on its own. You couldn’t really say it was *tasty*, though. I called it soup for the sake of convenience, but it was more like the water left over after boiling some meat and vegetables. The best thing about it was that it was warm and relaxing.

Nito and the girl sipped at the soup once they’d finished their food. The girl opened the bag at her waist and reached inside. Despite the bright light from the lantern, the interior looked pitch-black. She pulled out a bright-red apple.

“As thanks for the meal,” she said, offering it to me.

A wordless conversation passed between us, and then she nodded, turning to offer it to Nito instead.

“Really?!” Nito asked with a gasp, her eyes sparkling.

She loved fruit and other sweet things. We rarely saw anything like that, though, especially not fruit that looked freshly picked and hadn't been treated for preservation. Most fruit trees we came across didn't actually have fruit on them anymore. Nito was a clever girl, and so she knew just how valuable such a thing was in this world.

The other girl just told her to go ahead, though, holding out the apple toward her, so she couldn't refuse it. She took the apple with shaking hands and looked at it reverently. The tips of her ears, visible through the silvery curtain of her hair, were practically vibrating. It looked like the girl found Nito's happiness just as charming as I did. I mouthed my thanks to her and she simply offered me a shrug.

"Um, please tell me your name!" Nito blurted.

Apparently, she was trying to make a new friend. The other girl seemed a bit self-conscious about the unfamiliar experience, pulling her cap down slightly before answering.

"I'm Charolles."

"Thank you for giving me such a wonderful thing, Charolles. I'm so happy! Oh, I'm Nito, and this is Keisuke."

Aha, she's finally given the introductions herself! Until now, that had been my line: "I'm Keisuke, and this is Nito." I was happy about her growth, but somewhat saddened at the same time.

"Are you a traveler, Charolles?" Nito asked with an innocent look, clutching the apple to her chest.

"I am indeed. I was a courier first, though."

"A courier!" Nito exclaimed.

"A courier?" I murmured.

Nito immediately launched into an explanation.

"They transport things for people. They'll take anything anywhere, quickly and with guaranteed delivery. They were regulated by the country, so there aren't many of them."

“Regulated? Whoa.”

Although, from what she’d said, it didn’t sound much different than a mailman or delivery driver.

“Couriers have giantics, and using those requires permission from the country,” Nito added.

“Sorry, what’s a gigantic?”

Nito let out a short gasp of realization. It must have been fairly common knowledge.

“It’s a common name for magical artifacts—masterpieces crafted back when magic was flourishing. Couriers’ bags are the main type of magic that still exists.”

“So, what, they can fit anything inside them?” I asked with a laugh.

“That’s right,” Charolles interjected with a nod. “Courier bags have space-compression magic cast upon them. There’s more space inside my bag than in this whole room, and anything that I put inside it won’t degrade.”

“Huh, so it’s a 4D Pocket.”

“Fourdee...?”

Nito looked blankly at me. I couldn’t spare the attention to explain, though, as my mind was full of ideas. I finally understood why Charolles had been so lightly equipped when we’d met. That fresh apple must have been in her bag since long before the world ended up like it was. What a convenient thing to have. *But, wait, that makes her...*

“Charoemon...”

“I don’t exactly like that name. Could you not use it?” she asked, her voice much sharper than before.

Well, apparently that wasn’t going to fly, but I’d really thought it was the best name for her.

“You don’t know about giantics, and you used that weird nickname. Are you an otherworlder, by any chance?”

"Ten out of ten," I said with a smattering of applause.

"What a surprise," she said, her expression as far from surprise as could be. "So you really do exist, just like my ancestor said."

"Your ancestor?"

"It was almost a family legend. Around two hundred years ago, perhaps, a member of my family worked as a courier, and they knew an otherworlder."

I nodded with an acknowledging hum. If that was true, the otherworlder would have landed here when magic was at its peak. It must have been far more thrilling than this dead world.

"Did they learn magic and advance the world with their knowledge, then?" I asked.

"Who knows? There wasn't that much detail to the story. I just know they ran a restaurant or something."

"A restaurant?"

They came to this world and ran a store? Who'd do something like that? I thought that surely they'd have done something more exciting like using magic or whatever.

"Was it a café, by any chance?" Nito murmured.

"A café? Like a place that sells coffees, cakes, and stuff?" I checked.

"Yes. There's a theory that cafés originated with that restaurant. Coffee is seen as an everyday thing now, but people didn't used to import it to this continent very much in the past," she told me.

I scratched at my temple. I couldn't really imagine that.

"So...they wound up in another world, where magic was the norm, and they opened up a café and normalized coffee drinking? I don't get it. Why coffee?"

"Who knows? There aren't many records from that time. I only know what was in Forrozes' novel."

It seemed that otherworlders all had their own paths to tread. Some of them ran cafés, others traveled the world with an elf woman and painted the scenery

in a notebook, and still others followed their predecessor's tracks through a dead world.

"Why are you here, Charolles?" Nito asked, as if suddenly realizing that she'd been excluded from the conversation.

"I wanted to stop here," she answered.

"In the temple?"

"In the library, specifically. I'm looking for a book."

"What kind of book? I read a lot, so I might be able to help," Nito offered eagerly, her already-wide eyes opening even further.

Of course, Charolles could only smile ruefully.

"I don't know the title, and the pages were damaged last time I saw it, so I don't know whether it even really exists anymore."

"Oh... What kind of story was it?"

"It was a story about a mouse-knight rescuing a princess."

Nito hummed, thinking deeply. She was still holding the apple in both hands, so it looked almost like she was examining it. She must have been racking her brain, but apparently nothing came to mind, and she suddenly deflated. Even her ears drooped.

"I'm sorry, I can't think of anything..." She apologized.

"I've been searching for ages, and I haven't found it either, so don't worry about it."

Nito nodded in quiet agreement. I was actually worried about how down she seemed over it. She must have wanted to offer her own thanks for the apple.

"Why not help her look?" I suggested. "You can search for the map at the same time."

"That's a great idea!" she exclaimed, her energy suddenly returning. "I'll help you look!"

Nito made to stand, but then abruptly grew much more timid and looked at Charolles with upturned eyes.

“Um...if I won’t be in the way, that is,” she added.

Charolles covered her mouth with her fingertips and smiled slightly, then nodded.

“That’d be a real help. I’ll let you know if I find a map too.”

“Right!”

Nito’s smile was just as innocent as the smile of a girl her age ought to be. *Now that I think about it, all the people we’ve met so far have been adults. Maybe Nito can relate to Charolles better, as an older sister figure.*

We’d only ended up stopping here by chance, but it wasn’t like we had a packed itinerary for our journey, and we didn’t have to pay to stay here either. A truly free journey meant being able to go wherever you liked and just stop when you felt like it.

Nito helped with the tidying up and then set about searching the library. I did my usual routine—I sat down on the floor and took out my phone. There was no signal in this world, obviously, or power for that matter. The reason I could still use my phone for music and as a flashlight in such a world was the hand-cranked lantern in my bag. Night after night, I’d connect my phone to the lantern and convert man power into electrical power. It was horribly inefficient, obviously, so the process took a long time. While Charolles and Nito deftly looked through their books, I focused on winding the crank.

4

I opened my eyes to blinding light pouring into the room. I couldn’t help but roll over and bury my head in the feather pillow. I’d thought I might be able to enjoy a good night’s sleep in a bed after so long without one, but I had been naive. The unfamiliarity of the too-soft bed had left me unable to fall asleep. I was too used to sleeping on the hard ground in a sleeping bag.

I lifted my head from the pillow reluctantly, refusing to get up any further, and checked my watch. It was earlier than when I’d usually get up, so I sighed and let my head fall back down.

The easel stood between the two beds with Nito’s coat hung over it. It was

supposed to be some kind of partition, though it was largely ineffective. Past it, I could see a round mound of blanket resting in the middle of the other bed, with shining silver hair spilling from the gaps in the fabric. The mound gently rose and fell in a steady rhythm. Nito must have been happily off in dreamland.

The light from the windows shone down on me mercilessly. Blearily thinking that it was even more effective than my alarm, I gave up on sleeping in and pushed myself up. I combed my bedhead into some semblance of tidiness with my fingers as I walked over to the window. The temple building was atop a small hill, so the view was fairly uninterrupted. The curved road lined with gradually denser rows of houses had to be the one we'd traveled down yesterday, but in the morning sunlight, it looked utterly alien.

In the distance, I could see the feet of the mountains, as well as the overrun fields we'd passed and their relatively little greenery. That glow of brilliant white light off to the right of the fields was the reflection of the morning sun hitting water. It must have been a lake—there were our water supplies, and a place to wash, and maybe we'd even manage to get fish.

I couldn't help but smile when I realized how natural such thoughts had become. My first thoughts upon seeing the lake weren't that it was pretty, or that we should go sightseeing, but about its potential utility for our life. I really had become an out-and-out traveler. It was hard to tell whether that was a good or bad thing.

I picked up my toothbrush and tin mug from the bag on the bedside table and left the room. The corridor that had been so dark the night before was now full of light, and the grain of each of the wooden doors was clearly visible.

I opened the door into the temple proper and found it completely silent. The towering windows let the light pool in around the lines of pews, and the dust floating through the air seemed to sparkle in the light. The saint's statue was wreathed in dark shadows with only its outline visible. I almost forgot to breathe as I stepped through the door. This was a place of prayer, and the silent air was almost palpably thick in the room.

Suddenly, I noticed a figure sitting in the exact center of one of the pews. It was Charolles, and she was looking vacantly up at the statue. She didn't show

any sign of noticing my approach.

“Morning,” I greeted, finally prompting her to glance toward me.

“Right, morning.”

“You’re up early.”

“I like mornings. They put me in a good mood.”

I nodded in agreement before gesturing toward the space next to her. She told me to go ahead and I sat down next to her, letting out a breath.

“Thanks for yesterday,” I told her. “You made Nito’s day.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Think you’ll find your story?”

“Who knows. I’m not holding out much hope at least.”

“You’re looking even when you don’t think you’ll find it?”

“I’ve been looking for this story for a long time now and I still haven’t found it, so I can’t have baseless hope. It’d just make me feel depressed,” she explained evenly.

She may have been really blunt about it, but she *did* answer my question. *I guess she keeps communication to the bare essentials.*

At the very least, she definitely wasn’t the type to start a conversation because she found the silence unbearable, and our discussion came to a standstill. We were sitting with a person’s worth of space between us, looking up at the statue as the sun slowly lit the saint’s profile. As the sun steadily rose, the angle of the light changed in turn, making the shadows on her face form phantom expressions.

“...look sad,” I heard, catching the very tail end of the sentence.

“What?” I asked.

Charolles didn’t repeat herself. I definitely hadn’t misheard, yet I couldn’t guess what she’d meant. I found it difficult to see any real sadness in the saint’s expression. Just as I was about to ask what made her think that, the door behind us opened.

The old woman from the day before came through it, her bucket dangling from her hand. She looked at us sitting there and raised her eyebrows, before walking slowly over to us.

“Good morning. You’re here early,” I said.

She waved me off.

“That’s what happens when you get old. You’ve got someone else with you besides the half-elf girl?”

“We met here last night, by chance,” I explained.

“Meeting new people out in the sticks like this is pretty rare. You’d be better off on Mercian Street.”

“Mercian Street?”

The woman walked up to the statue and put down her bucket. I stood up as well and went over to join her.

“It’s a leisure area for the rich on the way to the lake from here. No one lives there normally, but it’s packed during the summer and winter holidays, full of people with too much time and money on their hands.”

So it’s a town that only has residents twice a year? Sounds like a weird place.

The woman stooped and wrung out her cloth before offering it to me. I took it right away, already knowing my role for the day. Still, I couldn’t help but give a rueful smile.

“Where am I cleaning today?”

“The upstairs windows.”

I followed her pointing finger to see a steep, narrow set of stairs up to a second floor. Only a narrow walkway ran along the wall up there.

I guess treating yourself to a bit of cleaning before breakfast ain’t bad once in a while. Healthier than sleeping in at least.

“You come over here too,” the woman said, beckoning Charolles, who came over from her seat without complaint and took the cloth she was offered.

“You do the windows on the first floor.”

“Very well,” she answered.

“You’re way too adaptable,” I muttered.

Charolles wasn’t showing any confusion. This had already happened to me yesterday so I was fine, but despite the bizarre situation of meeting a woman for the first time and being set to cleaning for her, Charolles didn’t bat an eyelash. She just met my gaze, gave a slight shrug, and then wordlessly headed for the windows.

I guess that’s what you call an adult’s composure. Maybe she’s older than me, I thought, watching her leave.

“Enraptured, lad?” the old woman asked.

“Not at all,” I answered, trotting over to the stairs.

5

Nito showed up just as I was finishing my cleaning, having woken up at some point. She watched wide-eyed as I wrung the cloth out in the bucket.

“Morning, Nito,” I greeted.

“Good...morning. What are you doing?”

“Cleaning.”

“I can see that. *Why* are...” she began asking, but then trailed off as she looked around the temple hall.

Charolles was sitting down and the old woman was getting up from where she’d been scrubbing the floor. Nito’s eyes shot open and she stared at the woman. Her ears started to vibrate, showing her distress.

“K-Keisuke! Th-The ghost! The old woman’s ghost!” she babbled.

She’s still hung up on that? She was acting so scared that it just made me want to laugh. To be fair, though, I hadn’t actually explained to her about the woman yet. Maybe I could have a little more fun with this.

I looked where she was pointing and tilted my head.

“Huh? Where...? I don’t see any old woman.”

A stifled yelp made its way out of Nito’s throat. Her lips tightened and her face paled. Timidly, she gave the woman a closer look. The woman in question unfolded her cloth and started walking toward us. Nito let out another cry and hid behind me.

“Keisuke! She’s coming! The ghost! She’s coming!”

Nito’s panicking had gotten the woman’s attention. She was looking doubtfully at us.

“What’s that racket about?” she asked.

“Sh-She spoke?!”

“Well, yeah,” I answered with a laugh, finally unable to contain myself. “She’s not a ghost.”

Nito looked up at me with an almost exhausted expression, before hesitantly looking past me again toward the woman as if peeking her head out from behind a corner.

“She... She’s alive?”

“She’d hardly be cleaning if she weren’t.”

My words, along with the fact that the old woman was clearly a physical being, had gotten it through to Nito that she wasn’t a ghost. Nito tugged and twisted at the back of my shirt while angrily mumbling to herself.

“Um, Miss Nito, you’re stretching out my clothes,” I said, trying some exaggerated politeness to smooth things over.

“You were teasing me?” she asked after a moment.

“Made your heart pound, huh?”

“It made me worry it’d stop beating!”

She smacked me in the back a couple more times before moving away. I knew she’d be all prickly and sarcastic with me even if I apologized. That was part of her charm, though.

Sighing at our antics, the old woman picked up her bucket.

“You three haven’t eaten this morning, have you?” she asked, turning to Charolles.

“Ah, no, we haven’t,” Charolles answered.

“Come with me, then. It’s nothing fancy, but call it my thanks for helping with the cleaning,” the woman said.

She started to walk off without waiting to hear our answer. I glanced over at Nito to see what she wanted to do about the sudden invitation, only to find her doing exactly the same. Even our questions came out at the same time.

“What’ll we do?” “What shall we do?”

Then Nito seemed to abruptly remember she wasn’t happy with me. Her expression stiffened before she turned away with a *hmph* and trotted over to Charolles.

“Shall we go, Charolles?”

“Right,” Charolles answered after a moment. “Let’s.”

She stood up and Nito immediately tugged at her hand to encourage her forward. She was really sulking, huh? Charolles looked toward me with a tilt of her head, giving me a look that seemed to be saying, “How sad.” I felt like I’d failed somehow. *Hrmgh*, I grumbled internally.

I ended up following the two of them out of the temple. The old woman wasn’t loading her things onto any vehicle. She was just walking down the hill. The slope was significant enough that it probably took a fair bit of effort to climb. The three of us had no trouble making our way down it, though, following the old woman.

Our path swung back and forth, passing between houses again and again. I got a sudden feeling that I’d seen someone off to the side, but when I stood still and looked around, all I could see were houses with shut-up windows and doors, no people. I tilted my head thoughtfully and turned to face forward again. Nito and Charolles had stopped as well and were looking back at me; they must have been waiting for me. I waved at them, and Nito—of course—turned away again and started walking, holding Charolles’s hand. She must have just dropped her guard for a moment. I smiled at the sight of them walking

together, then jogged after them.

About halfway down, we reached the old woman's home. It was situated midway up the slope, made of bricks like the other houses, and had some kind of sign above the door.

"What's it say?" I asked.

"It says 'no ghosts allowed.'"

"Seriously, I'm sorry," I apologized with a contrite smile, spreading my hands out in a placating gesture.

Unfortunately, she just pouted at me.

"It says 'Fago's Shoe Workshop,'" Charolles said from off to the side.

I thanked her, and Nito let out a sharp, betrayed gasp before looking up at the taller girl.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and come in," came a sharp voice from inside the house.

Flustered, Nito opened the door in a rush. The area directly inside was a small display room. Shelves lined the walls, holding countless shoes with thick, bulky heels. The slightly sweet scent of leather and shoe polish drifted through the dim space.

Two doors led farther in, and the right-hand one was open. I followed Charolles through it to find a living space on the other side. A low table and a sofa covered with a large quilt stood in the center of the room, with shelves and cabinets arrayed around them. The room wasn't huge, but it was set up with everything you'd need for an easy lifestyle, so it felt warm and comfortable.

Nito plonked herself down at the end of the three-seater sofa and Charolles sat next to her. After a moment of hesitation, I sat down in the remaining spot on Charolles's other side. There was also an empty armchair, but that was probably where the old woman would sit.

We could see the kitchen from the sofa. The woman had put a steaming kettle on the stove, and was now walking toward us with a tray holding a pot and teacups.

“We drink green tea ’round these parts. You might not enjoy it, but give it a try anyway,” she said.

“Green tea?” I blurted, leaning forward eagerly.

Nito and Charolles both seemed completely unfazed, though, which made things a little embarrassing for me, so I sat back gently. The old woman glanced at me as she set the tray down on the table.

“Oh, they have this drink where you’re from?”

“They do, though I don’t know if it’s exactly the same thing...”

The pot and cups sitting on the low table looked like what we’d use for black tea back home, but the liquid she poured from the pot definitely had the same color as green tea.

“People generally mix in these spices when they drink it. Some people add sugar too.”

She put out two jars. Nito and Charolles added the spices, but I took a sip of it as it was.

“Hmm?”

“So, is it the same?”

“It’s...slightly different. Maybe a bit sweeter...” I mused.

It didn’t stir up any sense of nostalgia. While this drink had the same name and appearance as one I knew, it was still a beverage from this world, not my own.

“Ah, it’s good,” Nito said, light-brown flecks of spice floating on the surface of her tea as she sipped it.

I took the jar of spices and used a teaspoon to add some to my own cup before taking a sip. The spices had a cool taste, almost like mint. It made each sip more refreshing than the last, and it kept the distinctive taste of the tea under control. It was definitely a better way to drink it.

“Finish your drinks while you wait. I’ll be done soon,” the old woman informed us, before returning to the kitchen.

A soft breeze blew through the half-open window, fluttering the thin curtain that hung across it and letting more light into the room. We all just stared absently out of the window, not really talking. Every so often, one of us would take a sip of tea as if we'd just remembered our drink. It felt like that time of morning that just carried you away with it.

Each of us had refilled our emptied cups by the time the woman returned with a plate in each hand. She placed them in front of Nito and Charolles before doubling back to bring over mine and her own. The plates were round, with a ring of yellow along their rims. On top of each one sat two slices of semicircular toast, what looked like boiled dark-red beans and onions, a serving of something that looked like yellow mashed potato, and an orange-colored jelly that held its shape.

I glanced at Nito and Charolles to see their reactions. Neither of them seemed particularly taken aback, so it must have been a common breakfast.

"It's not much, but go ahead and eat," the old woman told us, picking up a fork.

"It looks wonderful," Nito said politely, dipping her head.

Charolles gave a slight bow of her own and I followed suit.

I started off with a forkful of the mashed potato thing and broke into a smile at the taste. The word "rustic" might usually have been used in a more mocking way, but I meant it as praise here. While the mash was only lightly seasoned, that just let its own flavor show through even better. It was light and refreshing, the perfect sort of taste for mornings.

The biggest thing was getting to eat warm, home-cooked food around a real table. That alone elevated the meal to the best cooking you could get. Considering it all again, I realized this was a pretty strange experience. Someone we'd only met yesterday had invited us to share her breakfast table. Such a thing never would have happened back in my world; it was only because I'd come here that I was able to experience it.

I finished eating first, Charolles next, and Nito last. The old woman started brewing a fresh pot of tea, and in that slight lull, Nito hesitantly spoke to her.

“Um, is this a shoe shop?”

“Since my grandparents’ time, yes.”

Nito looked down at her own feet and rubbed her toes together. After a long moment of struggling with herself, she looked back up at the woman and spoke again.

“Um... C-Could you tell me your name?”

The corners of the woman’s lips lifted in amusement.

“It feels like a long time since I’ve been asked that. I’m Fago.”

“Miss Fago, can you make shoes smaller?”

“There’s a lot of ways, yes. Are you asking about the shoes you’re wearing now?” she asked, leaning forward to look at Nito’s feet over the table.

I looked over as well. I didn’t actually remember ever having taken a proper look at them before, but the boots she was wearing did seem somewhat too large for her frame. The toes were scuffed too, and there were deep creases in the material. They were well worn.

“They are a little big for you,” Fago agreed.

“I’ve stuffed them with cloth for the time being...”

“Let’s have a look-see. Come this way,” Fago said, standing up and opening the door into the display room.

I decided to follow along as well. She led us through the other door I’d seen earlier. Past it was a small room, practically emblematic of a craftsman’s workshop. The largest fixtures were two desks—one by the wall, the other in the center of the room—both blatantly well used. Tools, sheets of leather, partially finished shoes, wooden molds, hammers, chisels, and all the other accoutrements for making shoes littered their surfaces.

Fago pulled out a high-seated chair from a corner of the room.

“Sit down here.”

Nito climbed up into the chair as she’d been instructed, and then Fago pulled out a footrest and told Nito to put her feet on it. She untied Nito’s laces and

took the boots off with practiced movements. When she was done, Nito's tiny bare feet rested next to them, making the difference in size even clearer.

Fago picked up a pair of glasses from the nearest desk and perched it on her pointed nose, scrupulously inspecting Nito's boots.

"These aren't elven," she said. "This is how they make them in Mid."

"Mom said she had them made while she was traveling, and that they'd last thirty years."

Fago snorted.

"Thirty? These are Bragosca's. They'll last fifty if you take care of them."

"Fif—" Nito spluttered.

Her eyes widened so much that Fago laughed.

"Your mom had a discerning eye. These are rare shoes. They use the best materials you can find, which makes them so expensive that people who aren't clued in about these things would never buy them. If you treat them well, they'll last longer than a human does. They wouldn't outlast an elf, though."

She pulled out the small bits of cloth that had been stuffed inside each boot.

"Right then. I can make them smaller, but...you won't be small forever."

"Oh...maybe not," Nito agreed.

Fago was inspecting one boot—checking the sole, brushing a finger over the seams, and constantly turning it this way and that, making sure she saw each and every inch.

"These are well made. We'd be better off using insoles and stuffing the toes rather than opening them up to make alterations."

Nito nodded.

"Will that...take a long time?"

"You still have quite small feet, so the pieces of stuffing will be larger, and you'll need to wear them several times while we fine-tune the fit, so it will take a day or two."

Fago looked at me.

“Is the car by the temple yours?”

“It is...” I confirmed hesitantly.

“Perfect. There’s something I want you to do to pay for the shoes.”

Work required payment. We’d heard the same thing from Vandyke when he was repairing the Kettle for us. The sentiment went double for expertly done work. Nito was looking at me apologetically, though, so I smiled and nodded to show her that I didn’t mind.

“I want you to check if an old friend of mine is still kicking around. If he is, there’s something I want you to deliver to him.”

“Understood. Where does he live?”

“In one of the villas just past Mercian Street—that place I mentioned before.”

“That’s pretty close. You haven’t gone to check yourself?”

“I could if I were as young as you, or if I had a car, but it’s too much for my old bones. A round trip takes a whole day.”

She put Nito’s boots on the nearby desk and opened the door to a cabinet set within it. From inside, she pulled out a package covered in oiled paper.

“There’s a building with a blue roof right in the middle of the villas. Give this to the stubborn old man that lives there. He’ll know why you’ve come if you give him my name. Just leave it in the house if he’s kicked the bucket.”

“You sure don’t pull any punches...” I said with a strained smile as I took the package, shocked to hear someone talking about death so bluntly.

“I’ll come too!” Nito exclaimed.

She made to stand, then seemed to realize she still had no shoes on. My own gaze dropped to her tiny feet, taking in the light-pink color of her toenails.

“You shouldn’t stare at a girl’s feet like that,” Fago told me.

Her admonishment made me feel like I was doing something dirty. I looked away, clearing my throat.

“I’ll be back in a bit. You just get your shoes sorted,” I told Nito.

Nito used her hands to lift herself a bit and turned to look up at me. She reminded me of a cute little hamster. I could hear her grumbling to herself, trying to decide whether she should put off getting her shoes fixed and come with me.

“Bring me a souvenir,” she decided eventually.

“I’ll definitely keep an eye out for one.”

Before I left, I went back to the other room and found Charolles sitting with her eyes closed. I called out to her and she opened them, giving me a completely blank look.

“I’m heading out for a bit, so would you mind looking after Nito?”

She gave a slight inclination of her head, a strand of hair slipping loose and brushing across her cheek.

“I don’t think she needs it,” she answered.

“Just, y’know... Just in case. I worry.”

“Okay, sure,” she nodded, standing.

That short affirmative was all the reply she offered, and I was lost for words for a moment.

“Are you sure? You don’t want to know how long I’ll be gone or how far I’m going?”

“It’s fine. I more or less know,” she answered.

I watched her pass through the door into the workshop and couldn’t help but let out a mumble at her behavior.

“Cool as a cucumber...”

It occurred to me how strange it was that I felt so at ease leaving things in Charolles’s hands. We’d only barely met, but something about her just made me feel like I could trust her. Nito seemed to feel the same.

I left the shop and started climbing the hill. It had been a while since I’d done such things on my own, I realized. Going off by myself like this made me feel

lonely and happy all at once, which I found amusing. I'd reached a point where I could actually look back fondly on my time traveling alone.

It took longer to get back up to the temple than it had taken to get down to the shoe shop. I stopped by our room to collect my backpack and then climbed aboard the Kettle, putting the bag and Fago's package on the passenger seat.

I'd be driving alone, so I pulled out my phone to put something upbeat on. As the pop music I'd picked blasted forth from the phone, I lit the boiler. Steam-powered vehicles used the heat from the boiler to evaporate water into steam and convert that into a driving force, so I couldn't start moving until it came to temperature. I looked out the window while I waited, humming along to the familiar lyrics.

Chapter 2 — Sepia Shut within the Box

1

As I got closer to the area around the lake, the rows of buildings tucked in among the surrounding trees came into view. It wasn't all that far from the village, but the buildings here had this overwhelming "big city" air, like they belonged in an entertainment district. Most of them were shops, theaters, bars, and so on. I caught sight of one in particular that was so gaudy it couldn't have been anything but a casino. The street must have been so vibrant in the past, and yet now it was a shell of itself. It felt even more depressing seeing this place abandoned than a normal town.

I slowed down and kept an eye out as I continued through the area. The paved road became plain dirt and gradually thinned out. As I emerged from the thicket of trees, I suddenly saw a light to my left. I looked toward it and saw water—a huge lake reflecting the blue of the sky and the shining light from the sun. I'd have thought it was the sea, except that I could see the opposite shore.

The road started to climb, passing between huge houses on either side. I could tell at a glance that these chic wooden structures were villas. The old man I was looking for lived right at the center of these, so I followed the road as it climbed. Eventually I arrived at a more isolated area and saw a house nestled away in a corner. The years it had seen were clear in the darkened color of its wood siding. There was a large open space in front of the house, but no car parked there.

I brought the Kettle to a halt outside the entrance. Overgrown greenery surrounded the house on three sides, but the front had been kept clear and I could look straight down on the lake from where I'd parked. It must have been the best view in the area. While thinking the building was a little understated for the prime location it occupied, I stepped up onto the porch and moved toward the door.

There was a screen door on the outside of it, so I opened that first and then knocked on the door itself, but there was no reply. I peered in through the windows, but it was completely dark inside, so I couldn't even tell if the house was furnished.

Just then, I caught sight of an armchair sitting out on the porch. A closer inspection showed that although it had been kept outside for many years, the seat of it was clean of any dust. Someone was definitely caring for this chair.

I heard the crunch of a footstep on sand from behind me. Looking toward the lake, I saw someone climbing the slope. Our eyes met, and mine went round. The other person's eyes were round as well—not metaphorically, but physically.

They had...round, beady eyes.

"Why're you here?" they asked.

The voice was an elderly man's, with a slight wispieness to it. If my eyes were to be believed, though, the person in front of me was not a human at all. I was looking at a guinea pig. A guinea pig that was wearing pleated pants and a pristine shirt, had a spotted pattern on his furry face, and could speak.

"Ah, yes, well," was all I could manage.

"None of those are answers."

The guinea pig...man had a fishing rod over his shoulder and a fish hanging from his hand. It got crazier; the fish was about as big as my arm. *Do guinea pigs even eat fish?*

Without really seeming wary at all, he walked over and passed by me. As I watched his retreating back, I finally calmed down.

Right. This is another world. Of course there's a guinea pig that walks on two legs, fishes, and speaks like an old man. After all, Nito's a half-elf. Not that I know what a full elf is like.

I jogged after the guinea pig and called out to him.

"Um! Fago sent me with a package."

"Huh, so she's still alive. Now I'm glad I didn't throw the chit out," he answered, entering the house without me.

I went and grabbed the package from the passenger seat, then returned and knocked at the door. I knew there was someone inside this time, but there was still no response. There was nothing else I could do, so I opened the door and stepped in.

Behind it wasn't a hall, but the living room. I sighed admiringly as I looked around the room. Bookshelves, sofas, and a table filled up the space, but rather than feeling crowded, everything was in harmony. Maybe that was due to good interior design, or perhaps just to all the furniture being a reddish brown, or maybe even just to how things were laid out.

"Would you show me?" the guinea pig asked, wiping his hands with a cloth as he approached.

Standing in front of me, he folded the cloth and set it on the back of the nearest sofa. He took the wrapped package from me and used a hand to unwrap the paper. Inside was a pair of boots. They were the same reddish brown as the furniture in the room, but the round toes were polished to a shine.

The guinea pig nodded with a hum before sitting on the sofa and putting the boots down at his feet. He quickly shed the shoes he had on and replaced them with the new pair. Then he started walking up and down the middle of the room, checking how comfortable the new boots were.

"So, how is she?" he asked, looking at his feet while he did his check.

"I think she's fine. She was cleaning the temple this morning."

"It's an important custom for her. I'm impressed she's kept at it while the world's falling apart."

He came to a stop and looked at me. I couldn't read his expression; all I could do was awkwardly meet his gaze.

"Just out of interest," he asked, "do otherworlders get caught up in their habits as well?"

I let out a gasp.

"You needn't be so surprised. You looked shocked when you saw me, but

beastmen and demihumans aren't that rare. Otherworlders are the only ones that react like they've never seen one of us before. Honestly, you're the more interesting one from my perspective."

I could understand and agree with his explanation, but I couldn't quite agree with being a more interesting sight than him.

"Well, regardless," he said with a nod, pulling a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket and holding it out to me. "The receipt. It's signed as well."

As I took and checked it, the guinea pig turned his back on me.

"I need to prepare the fish, so excuse me. Give my thanks to Fago."

He picked up the cloth from the sofa and headed farther inside. I was left standing alone in the room.

It had been a shock to see a guinea pig who felt more like a person wearing a costume, but what felt even stranger was his behavior. He'd acted way too normally, almost like this was just any old day. He'd fished, accepted a delivery, and tested out his new shoes. It didn't feel like he was living in a dead world in the slightest. He might have lived the exact same way five years ago, and maybe he still would even five years from now. While there was nothing in particular that I wanted to ask, I really wanted to talk more with him. Still, I knew it'd be rude to call him back out just for that, so I gave up and left.

It was getting toward noon as I stepped outside. The sunlight was falling straight down, setting the shadows from the leaves in stark relief against the ground. Just standing still I could feel the heat on my cheeks. The gentle waves from the lake sent scattered droplets of light ricocheting around the area as well. I'd never really seen why people needed holiday homes in the past, but now I could at least somewhat understand their value. Spending the warm, vibrant days of summer gazing at the brilliant blue of the lake was probably pretty pleasant.

I moved to the edge of the clear space and noticed a set of stairs descending the slope. They weren't paved or anything, just steps cut into the earth and anchored with thin planks of wood and logs. I headed down them, and found a small boat moored to a jetty at the bottom. He must have used it to go out fishing on the lake.

“This really is the ideal retirement.”

It was almost too calm. I stood there for a while looking at the lake before I climbed the stairs back to the Kettle. I twisted the wheel and slowly pushed the throttle, heading down the road again.

As I got back to Mercian Street, it definitely did feel deserted. Despite being a man-made location cut out of nature, it showed no sign of being used, so the buildings among the trees just felt out of place. I was halfway down the street when I came across a chair in the middle of the road. With no other choice, I stopped the Kettle in front of it, and then a thought occurred to me.

What’s a chair doing here?

A chill ran down my spine. There hadn’t been a chair here on my way in. Someone had put it there afterward, and the obvious reason was to stop me here on my way out.

Someone else must be here.

The moment that thought passed through my mind, there was a knock at the driver’s window. Someone was standing outside it.

2

I just sat there, staring wide-eyed; any other reaction I might’ve had was delayed, naturally, by the shock. However, if you were to have asked me *what* had shocked me so badly, I could only have said it was a combination of several things. Firstly, outside my window loomed the hulking figure of the stranger that had just knocked on it. Secondly, said stranger held a sturdy-looking metal pole, flecked with rust, in the opposite hand. Finally, the stranger’s chiseled face sported a thick layer of makeup, and a flashy dress clung to...his?...muscular frame.

Our eyes met and the stranger’s free hand rose again to tap on my window lightly. My frazzled brain, running on autopilot, sent a signal to my right hand, which wound the window down. The assembly squealed as it descended.

“Sorry for stopping you so suddenly. Who are you, by the way?” the stranger asked in a practiced falsetto, speaking with a feminine lilt.

“I feel like I should be the one asking that...”

“You have a point there. Well, okay, I’m Paula.”

“Right... Paula.”

“Yup, Paula.”

Silence fell between us, until a sudden thump on the door cut through it. I jolted upright in shock.

“We’re introducing ourselves, right?” Paula prompted. “You’re just a tad slow, aren’t you? What’s your name?”

“I’m Keisuke...” I eventually managed.

“Right. Okay then, Keisuke. What did you come to that village for?” Paula asked, eyes narrowing under purple eyeshadow.

“I didn’t exactly have a reason, just came across it on the road.”

“So you’re just a traveler?”

“Guess so. Though I’m doing some peddling on the side.”

Paula looked steadily at me for a long moment, before eventually nodding and tossing the metal pole backward. It landed with a clatter.

“We’re all good, then. Sorry ’bout that. Must have been a shock, huh?” Paula said in a much cheerier tone, waving a hand around.

“Yeah, it sure was...or more like a string of shocks... Um, do you live around here, Paula?”

“Sure do, right in that theater.” With a wave of a finger, Paula indicated the big building I’d just driven past. “Why not stop by if you’re free? We’ll give you a combo welcome and apology performance.”

Paula gave an intense wink that more or less wiped out any courage I might’ve had to refuse. At the same time, I was actually really curious to learn more about this unusual stranger.

“Sure, I guess.”

“That’s perfect, then. Guess I’ll take the passenger seat.”

Paula jogged around the car and opened up the passenger door, climbing in. I was the shorter of the two of us by a lot, and there was quite a bit of muscle on those arms. Even so, a feminine, almost citrusy, scent wafted forth from Paula, making my mind go just a little fuzzy. I gave Paula a searching look and he...no, she shyly put her hands on her cheeks as if to hide her face.

“Oh my. It’s rather rude to stare at me like that.”

“Sorry,” I apologized after a moment.

Earlier it was the oversized guinea-pig person, and now it was this burly man...or woman. With an internal comment about how many unusual new faces there were here, I turned the Kettle around and headed for the theater. I was still trying to think of something to talk about when we got to the entrance a few moments later. Paula opened the door and got right out, and I followed suit from my own side of the car.

The space behind the theater’s glass doors was dark. It felt even more like an abandoned ruin than the normal houses, and yet Paula looked completely at ease opening the doors and heading inside. Through the front doors was a small entrance hall. A reception desk stood directly in front of us with a door on either side of it. Both of them were wide open, but the darkness shrouding whatever lay past them was thick enough that I couldn’t see where they led.

“This way,” Paula guided, heading through the right-hand door.

I could smell dusty cloth inside as I followed. The light at our backs—the only source of illumination in the room—fell in a rectangle on the floor, our shadows stretching across its center. My eyes hadn’t adjusted to the darkness and I could barely see anything else. Paula strode off, while I progressed more carefully. I found a row of chairs and grabbed hold of one, feeling around for the chair in front of it. Moving row by row, I clumsily headed forward.

Suddenly, I heard a noise—the rasp of something metal sliding across a surface. Eventually, it morphed into the sound of castanets tapping out a rhythm. My confusion shifted into concentration. As I listened, a beam of light hit the far wall and brought the stage in front of me into focus. It shone brighter than anything I’d ever seen from a lantern, sparkling across the stage. Layered over the rhythm of the castanets came a more distorted noise of something

thumping out across the stage.

Paula leaped in from the wings, dress fluttering as she landed in the center of the stage and twirled in place. The dress left shimmering trails in its wake as she spread her arms toward me, crooking a finger invitingly. The music got faster and more intense, and Paula's dancing followed suit. She swung her massive frame around, tracing out feminine, almost alluring, curves with her arms and hips. I was shocked, of course, but before I knew it, her dance had me enraptured and tightly gripping the back of the chair.

Eventually, the music stopped, and so too did the dance. Her arms and legs came neatly into place at her sides, and I started applauding. Loudly. Paula's shoulders were heaving, but she bowed toward me with a smile, then vanished off stage and reappeared from a door at the side of the seating area.

"So, did you enjoy it?" she asked, still breathing heavily; she was giving off enough heat that I could feel it just from standing next to her.

"It was incredible." Those were the only words I could find to express myself. "So you're a dancer, then?"

"Well, more accurately, I wanted to become one, yes."

"You didn't use to dance here, then?"

Paula hid her mouth behind her hand and laughed cheerfully. It was a dainty, feminine laugh, with only the slightest hints of masculine roughness showing through.

"I'd never have been able to dance in a place as high-class as this. I came here to... Well, let's call it the end of my version of your journey."

"Huh... The end of your journey was dancing in this theater?"

"Well, I haven't got anything else to do, have I?" she asked, waving a hand at me. "I'd always wanted to do this, and yet my wish could never have been granted before... It ends up rather boring dancing to no audience, though. I'm glad you showed up, Kei. I finally got myself fired up again."

Kei?

The look in her eyes was somewhat alluring, but also somewhat devious, and I

felt a chill run down my back. I quickly shifted to put more space between us.

Paula giggled teasingly and murmured, “How innocent.”

I wanted to argue the point, but in the face of the somewhat mature mood she’d created, my relative immaturity stood out, so she wasn’t exactly wrong.

“Right. I need to introduce you,” she said, apparently having just remembered something.

She turned toward the stage and called the name Jill in a languid, high-pitched voice. It was the first time I’d ever heard someone stretch a name out into such a sweet sound. Once the saccharine echoes of her call died out, silence returned with a vengeance. There was no sign of this Jill, either in person or in voice.

Paula put a hand on her hip and puffed out her pectorals before letting out a sigh.

“Honestly, that girl. She’s so shy.”

With a brief “wait here,” she vanished backstage again. She returned before long, dragging another young woman with her. She pushed this woman forward, planting her in front of me, and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Right. This is Jill,” she said. “Jill, this is Kei. He’s our audience.”

The young woman named Jill hunched in on herself, winding her hands around each other, and ever so slightly shook her head. Even her gaze wouldn’t settle on a specific target.

“Uh, hello,” I tried greeting her.

Jill jolted in surprise and then gave several trembling nods.

“Ilo...”

Her voice was so faint, I only caught the tail end of the word. I could see why Paula had called her shy.

“She’s a bit introverted, as you can see, but she sings really well.”

“You’re a singer?”

That was a surprise. I couldn’t imagine her standing like this on a stage,

belting out lyrics. Yet Jill shook her head frantically, sending her long braid bouncing.

“No, um, that’s too much...”

That was all she said before she ran off and hid behind Paula. Apparently, this was the most she could bear.

“Ahhh, jeez. There’s no helping her,” Paula said with a sigh. “Thanks to that personality of hers, she’s never actually stood on the stage. She’s so good she’d *fill* this theater and send shivers down everyone’s spines. She’s practically magic.”

“I’d love to hear that.”

“Right? I could die happy if I got the chance to dance along to her singing.”

She then called a wheedling request over her shoulder for Jill to come out, but there was no response. Paula just gave me a reluctant, apologetic smile. I’d pretty much expected that outcome, of course, given how Jill had been frantically shaking her head earlier. I might have figured that if you had such a good singing voice, you’d be able to hold your head high, but apparently it wasn’t that simple. Personalities don’t work off of logic, after all.

“So you two spend your time here singing and dancing?”

“That we do.” Paula nodded. “We don’t need to earn money, and there’s a veritable mountain of food in the vault, so we just do what we want.”

“The vault?” I asked; my sharp hearing wouldn’t let that word slip past it.

“Yup. Lots of the rich villa owners fled here. They all pulled together a bunch of food and necessities and collected them in a warehouse at the end of the street. There’s plenty left in there.”

“Would I be able to get some of that?”

“Well, it’s not like it’s actually ours, so I’d say do whatever you like.”

Paula paused there and put a finger to her lips. A grin made its way onto her face, and she leaned in closer.

“Actually, nope. It’s for the people living here,” she decided instead. “I’ll split

some with you if you give me a hand though.”

It was strange. This was probably just a normal trade we were talking about, but with Paula facing me down so intently, it felt like I was making a deal with the devil.

“What do you mean, a hand?” I asked, swallowing.

“I want you to be our customer.”

“Uh...excuse me?”

“I mentioned earlier. We’re the only ones on this stage, and yet we’ve got no audience. I want the watching eyes, the applause, the cheers! I’d even take the jeering from back in the day! I’m tired of dancing for empty seats.”

She had her arms spread wide, hands and face turned up toward the ceiling, almost as if she were striking a pose in a play. She had a bit of a tendency toward exaggerated gestures.

“So I want you to come to this theater. I want you to watch my dance,” she said, then paused and dragged Jill out from behind her. “And listen to her song.”

“Wha? I-I didn’t agree to this...”

“Jill doesn’t seem entirely on board. Are you sure?”

“It’ll be fine. If we don’t try, she’ll never be able to get on that stage, and we might never get another audience considering the state of the world. They say opportunity only knocks once, right? So we need to open the door wide.”

As she spoke, she lifted Jill’s hand to point toward the door, before casting me a flirtatious look and a wink. She’d worded it like a business deal, but there was no downside in it for me. We’d started to approach the bottom of our food stocks, and with this I could both resupply and enjoy a dance performance at the theater, and perhaps even a song. *You could even say it’ll slightly enrich my mostly boring life*, I reflected.

“Of course I’ll help,” I told her.

“Excellent! You’re a sweet boy, Kei.”

She suddenly opened her arms toward me, but I swiftly retreated. It might have been the quickest reaction time I'd ever had. I could foresee only asphyxiation awaiting me if I got stuck between her burly arms and chest.

"I'll pass on the hug."

"Such a shy guy," she said, reluctantly dropping her arms. "Shall I show you to the vault now? Or would you rather listen to Jill sing?"

As the topic shifted to Jill, the girl in question shook her head so fast I thought her braid might fly off. She'd probably have fainted if I accepted Paula's offer.

"I've got some things I want to sort out first, so I'll head back to the village for now," I answered. Nito and Charolles were still waiting there, and I figured I may as well invite them too. "I might even bring some more audience members with me next time."

"Oh, how wonderful," Paula squealed, clasping her hands in front of her chest.

Meanwhile, at her side, Jill was shaking her head even harder. *She really can't deal with people, I guess*, I thought as Paula spoke again.

"You're staying at that temple for a while, right?"

We didn't have any real itinerary, or any reservations waiting for us at the next hotel, and we didn't have our tickets home booked either. Nito and I were on a journey to find the places in her notebook, and we'd just stopped here looking for a map to follow on that trip. So the answer to how long we'd be staying was simple, if vague: either until we found a map in the library, or else until we knew that there wasn't one to find. I had to rely on Nito and Charolles for that search, and with Nito so captivated by the books, I doubted she'd find anything very soon.

"I think we'll be there for another few days at least," I answered Paula. "Probably."

"Right. Then feel free to come visit whenever you've got the time. We'll be practicing, right, Jill?"

Jill seemed on the verge of tears as she frantically shook her head.

“See, Jill’s feeling super motivated as well.”

“Are you sure that’s really *motivation*?” I asked.

“It’ll be fine. It’s only scary and painful the first time.”

I decided not to ask anything else at that point. After all, if you go looking for trouble, you just might find it.

3

Fago had already prepared lunch by the time I got back. While I felt guilty about imposing on her, I ate gratefully along with the others. Afterward, Nito and Fago got back to work, focused on adjusting the former’s boots, and Charolles switched out with me, heading off to the temple library. Therefore, I was stuck sitting on the sofa with too much time on my hands.

The tea that followed the meal had been delicious, but the teapot didn’t make a great conversationalist. Boredom soon had my gaze wandering, bouncing from item to item in the room. Someone had hammered boards into the wall to make a set of three shelves. There were several framed photos displayed neatly on the shelves, but one of them had been turned facedown. I couldn’t help but be curious. I stood up without really thinking about it and picked up the photo. It showed a young woman and a boy, both dressed up, and the boy looked a bit tense. *Guess he’s Fago’s son?*

I looked through the other pictures, but oddly, he wasn’t in any of them. There was Fago, someone that was probably her husband, and a girl that must have been her daughter. The girl was in several pictures—she went from a small child to an adult, and then showed up alongside a young man and new children—but there was only that one picture of the boy.

“He’s dead.”

I rushed to put back the picture in my hand, but I knew it was already too late. Still holding it, I turned around awkwardly to find Fago coming through the doorway with Nito in tow. We stood in silence for a moment.

“Sorry,” I finally said. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“Going through facedown photos is hardly the best look.”

I couldn't refute that and just softly returned the photo to the shelf.

“Was it an illness?”

“No, we killed him.”

I definitely hadn't seen that coming. I stared at her in shock, with Nito mirroring my reaction. Fago wasn't smiling like she'd just told a joke. Her expression was gravely serious.

“Raising children is hard. However much we care for them, we parents are still only human,” she told us, pouring a cup from the teapot.

I couldn't exactly parse her abstract way of wording it, and Nito probably couldn't either. Fago's mood didn't seem to have worsened, but intruding on such a personal topic was definitely a delicate problem. I wasn't sure whether to actually ask any further, so I just stayed silent.

“Do you...regret it?” Nito asked.

“Regret?” Fago repeated, closing her eyes and bringing the cup to her lips. “You're rather insensitive too. What good would that do? Regrets and repentant prayers wouldn't bring my child back.”

She inclined the cup, taking a sip, then lowered it again and let out a shallow breath that felt a lot heavier than it sounded.

Nito opened her mouth again and I shook my head in warning. Family matters were about as private and personal as issues got. Digging at that kind of stuff out of pure curiosity was one of the rudest things I could think of. Whatever the circumstances were, only the actual people involved could understand or resolve them.

Nito's lips twisted as she gave a jerky nod in response. She was wearing her normal boots, so I assumed they were done adjusting the fit for the moment. Things weren't exactly awkward, and Fago didn't seem angry either. I just felt too out of place to stay in the same room as her, so I spoke up.

“We should head off, then.”

“Right. Come back tomorrow. I want to hear how they fit.”

We left Fago's house and climbed aboard the Kettle without speaking. I drove off, moving down the hill at a crawl. I would need to turn the Kettle around to head back up to the temple, and the roads around her house were too narrow for that, so I needed to find somewhere more open.

"I wonder what happened," Nito said eventually.

She was compassionate and earnest, so she had a tendency to treat other people's problems as her own.

"Whatever happened, I don't think we should ask about it."

"But she said she killed her son."

"It's a family matter."

Nito fell silent, but I could feel her gaze on me. We came upon a house with a big front yard, so I drove into it and backed out onto the road again.

"Keisuke," she asked eventually, "aren't you curious?"

"Of course I am. But asking won't do any good, even if she did kill him."

We climbed the road back toward the temple, the Kettle feeling much heavier as we went past Fago's house.

"Doesn't speaking to someone about a burden like this make it easier to bear than holding onto it alone?" she asked.

"I think so, yes. It's probably easier that way," I answered, before adding, "But it isn't our place to ask after it or decide who that confidant should be."

"That...sounds like a very detached way of looking at things."

"Well, yeah, asking about difficult things might be kind in a certain way, but giving solace like that's the role of the gods, and we're far from gods. Actually, I guess here it'd be the saint."

Fago had prayed to that saint's statue the day before. I didn't know for sure what had been in her prayers. Maybe they'd been about her son, maybe not, but it seemed likely that she would pray about that type of thing.

Nito didn't reply, so I spared a glance at her. She sat in silence with a slight

pout on her face. Her own kindness had probably left her feeling unhappy. Nito was too earnest to abandon her curiosity and urge to meddle. She was the sort of girl that always wanted to understand people's worries, to ease their pain.

"Are your boots finished?" I asked.

Nito didn't complain about my blatantly changing the subject. She just had a slightly sulky tone to her voice as she answered me. "She added cushions that match the shape of my feet. If they don't work, she'll adjust them tomorrow."

"And how do they feel now?"

"They're rather agreeable."

I couldn't help but snort slightly at her unique way of speaking. Soon, we finished climbing the hill and drove into the space in front of the temple. I stopped the Kettle next to the entrance and checked my watch. It was already nearly evening, so I decided that we wouldn't be going out again that day and extinguished the boiler before hopping out. Nito had left the Kettle before me and waited by the entrance.

"Did you finish the delivery?" she asked when I walked up to her.

"Ah."

I put my hand to my chest and found the receipt from the guinea pig in my breast pocket. I'd completely forgotten.

"I'll go finish it now."

I turned around and saw the sun starting to set before my eyes. It was moving slowly—the evenings were still long and summery—and I expected I'd have the time to deliver the receipt and be back before it had fully set. Having to make another round trip in the car was kind of annoying, though, and I'd just put the boiler out, which made it all the more irritating. My emotions must have shown on my face, because Nito was looking up at me with a smile.

"You could do it tomorrow instead."

I thought it over for a moment. It wasn't a particularly urgent errand, so it likely wouldn't be an issue. Fago would probably head up to the temple to clean in the morning, and we had to go back to get Nito's boots checked anyway. It

would literally be no issue to do it tomorrow; I'd just need to accept going to sleep with a minor bit of regret.

Just as I was about to say so, though, I had a thought.

"This is a job for a pro," I declared.

Nito gave me an odd look as we entered the temple. I headed for the library with her close behind. As we got there, Charolles had just closed a book and was standing up.

"I have a job for you," I told her.

It was only at times like this that Charolles ever seemed surprised. She looked at me for a moment, puzzled, but her face soon smoothed back into her usual blank expression.

"Well, that came out of nowhere."

"It's the perfect job for a courier. But maybe it's a bit too difficult for you?"

I added just a little challenge to my words. She put the book in her hands back on the shelf and faced me again.

"What kind of job?"

I pulled the receipt out of my pocket and proffered it.

"I want you to take this to Fago."

She was silent for a beat.

"What is this, a kid's errand?"

Well, yes, pretty much.

"That's not all. This is the more important bit: once you're done, you need to head to the theater on Mercian Street. It's the biggest building on the street, so you'll see it right away. There's someone called Paula there. Tell her that I sent you, and then you'll understand."

Charolles frowned doubtfully.

"I don't see the point."

"What matters is whether or not you can do it."

“Fine. What’s the pay?”

“Dinner tonight. Along with a shock the likes of which you’ve never before experienced.”

“I hate people that are all talk,” she warned me.

I just smiled back at her. She looked me over, evaluating me, but not for very long. In the time it took to blink, she’d taken the receipt.

“I’m looking forward to it. Just a little though.”

I kept my laughter under control as I watched her leave. It was just a little joke. People needed fun like this in their lives. While I was musing, Nito pulled at my sleeve.

“What’s this ‘shock the likes of which you’ve never before experienced’? I’m curious too.”

Her eyes were sparkling with said curiosity, but I hesitated to explain.

“You’re a little young,” I told her eventually.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It’s just sorta too intense, or something.”

That didn’t quell her interest, though, and after her wheedling wore me down, I ended up promising to take her there the next day.

4

Once I heard the characteristic noise of exhaust from a steam engine and the crunch of tires on gravel from outside the window, signaling Charolles’s return, I lit the burner on the Svea and waited. Soon, the faint sound of the temple door opening reached my ears. Following that, the door into the corridor opened and a figure stepped into the moonlight shining in from the window. She wasn’t holding any light, but she still didn’t falter as she approached.

“Isn’t it a bit dark?” I asked.

The faint light from the flames licking the bottom of the pot was just enough to let me barely see Charolles. I was in the same place as the night before,

sitting just between the corridor itself and the library. That meant that I served as a bit of a roadblock for her. Charolles crouched down in front of me, the hem of her cape fluttering out to rest over the carpet.

“Beastmen have good night vision,” she explained.

“That’s good. Did you hand it over to Fago?”

“She said that you could have brought it over tomorrow, and that you’re impatient for your age.”

“That sounds like a thanks to me, so I’m all good with that.”

“Life sounds a lot nicer the way you see it.”

“Anyway, good work. Here’s your reward,” I told her, pointing at the pot of water I’d put on to boil.

“Oh my, how did you know that hot water was my favorite?”

“I investigated, of course. Asked all over the place.”

Charolles raised her shoulders in a slight shrug, lifting her left hand from where it’d been resting in her lap, and pointed at me.

“Paula said hi.”

“Not a letdown, was it?” I asked smugly.

Her eyebrows furrowed in apparent unhappiness, but she couldn’t keep up the act for long. Letting out a soft snort, she smiled.

“Definitely not. I’ll admit it. That was...certainly a surprise.”

“Right? It was a shock, yeah?” I leaned forward.

“I don’t think you’d find anyone that wouldn’t have been surprised. It’s not something you’d expect, after all. That dancing was so passionate.”

“Yeah, it was incredible,” I agreed, before adding, “That’s great. It’s not just me misinterpreting things.”

I relaxed at having found someone who shared my opinion on this. I’d been worried that the moving nature of what I’d witnessed and my surprise over it had only been my misunderstanding of something this world saw as

commonplace. If Charolles shared my surprise, though, then that wasn't the case. The shock of Paula's appearance and dancing crossed worlds.

"Where did you find her?"

"Ah, well, I just happened across her."

Just as we were getting into a proper conversation, I heard someone clear their throat. I turned around and saw Nito sitting inside the library, reading her book as if nothing had happened.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine. My throat was just a little dry."

She hadn't even looked my way as she spoke, but I figured if she said she was fine, then she must be fine. I looked back at Charolles and carried on.

"There was a chair blocking the road on my way back from the lake," I explained.

A round of exaggerated, almost pointed, coughing interrupted us a second time.

"You sure you're okay?" I asked, turning around again, but Nito was still focused on her book.

"I'm fine. Indeed, nothing at all is wrong, no sir."

"That's fine, then... You hungry?"

"Hungry? Rather, yes. I'm absolutely famished."

I paused for a moment, watching her closely.

"You know it'll be done soon, right?" I asked eventually.

"As fast as possible, if you please?"

"It sounds like there's an implication in your words there..."

"An implication? That's impossible. If there were then I'd eat it. After all, I'm famished."

I wasn't entirely sure what either of us was talking about at that point, but I was broken out of my thoughts by a quiet laugh. Nito seemed surprised by it

too, and looked over at Charolles. I turned back around again to find Charolles laughing, hiding her mouth with a hand as her eyes crinkled up in amusement. It felt like I was witnessing a rare event, like finding the end of a rainbow.



Our conversation must have been pretty amusing, then. While I was a little embarrassed about that, it wasn't an unpleasant feeling, and I soon joined in on the laughter. Turning back to Nito, I saw that she seemed to share my same mood. She was shying away, but as our gazes met, she laughed. However, apparently remembering herself, she turned away with a pout right afterward.

"You make a really good pair," Charolles told us, slight hints of laughter still audible in her voice.

"We're the best of friends, after all," I answered.

"We are not the best of friends."

I had a feeling we'd had the same exchange before; apparently, she still didn't see me that way.

"Being the best of friends sounds wonderful. I'm jealous," Charolles said, chuckling.

"I told you, we're not!" Nito insisted.

"It's okay. I know you're embarrassed to admit it," I said in a soothing tone.

"Keisuke, are you mocking me?" she demanded.

"Oh, the water's boiling."

"And now you're ignoring me?!"

She stood up with a clatter and came over, smacking my back repeatedly. Nito was surprisingly weak, though, so it ended up being more of a massage than anything. I ignored her physical protestations and picked up the can I'd set down by the wall. I'd already opened it, revealing the broccoli-ish vegetables packed inside, which meant that it was destined to be the main component of our meal for the night. We had a lot of cans of broccoli to get through.

"Just wondering, Nito," I spoke up. "How long are you going to keep up the shoulder massage?"

"It's not a massage. I'm demonstrating my displeasure with you," she insisted, before making a quiet admission that it'd tired her out.

Giving up on it, she sat down next to me. She looked into the pot of boiling

water with an air of disapproval.

“Is that all we’re having?” she asked.

“I get you, but you don’t need to be that put out.”

Adding the broccoli had turned the liquid inside the pot green. It wasn’t a particularly appetizing sight. I used a knife to shave some rock salt into the pot and then left it to simmer and soften the vegetables.

“That looks like it’s got a while to go,” Charolles commented.

“Yeah, probably around half an hour.”

“Then I’ll read until it’s done. Nito, want to join me?” Charolles offered.

Nito’s eyes widened, but her surprise then immediately morphed into a smile and she happily agreed.

“I found an interesting book earlier,” she said as she stood.

“Oh? What kind of book?” Charolles asked as she followed suit.

She walked past me into the library, and the both of them sat down at the table in front of a book, chattering away. They were getting along like a house on fire. And there I was, over at the neighbor’s place. I watched the broccoli rise and fall with the bubbling water. It felt rather lonely, actually. All I had was broccoli...

I got tired of that before even a minute had passed and I decided to lean against the wall. I pressed the button on my watch to set the timer. That way I wouldn’t forget about the broccoli, though I had no idea what in the room I could ever get so engrossed in that I’d lose track of the time. Nito and Charolles were absorbed in their book. I considered that maybe I should help look for the map. Actually thinking about things, I realized I didn’t need to be able to read to tell something was a map. I’d be no use at finding Charolles’s story, though.

But, truthfully, I couldn’t be bothered. I wasn’t a massive fan of books, and that went double when they were in a foreign language. Just the thought of flipping endlessly through them and putting them back on the shelf made my head hurt. In short, the extra time on my hands was something I had out of pure selfishness. It was like the melancholy of a student on summer vacation,

wanting to do something easy and fun. In the same way that they'd never think of actually studying, I didn't want to look for the map.

I stirred the broccoli intermittently with a spoon and started drawing up vague plans for tomorrow. I'd help Fago with the temple cleaning. I'd take Nito to that theater and let her meet Paula and Jill. Then I'd ask Paula to show me to the food stores. We'd search here in the library for a map... *Actually, I want to learn the guinea pig's name. I don't want to just keep calling him "the guinea pig."*

Thinking it over in detail like that made me realize that I'd met so many people recently. It was actually only a few, but after all the completely deserted plains, mountains, and ruins, even that felt like a lot. Thinking back on the memories of the day made it obvious that it was a momentous one, and yet I'd spent it in the same way as any other. Guilt assailed me at that, like the mourning at the end of a meal when you'd wanted to keep eating and tasting it.

Would we forget about today when tomorrow came? Maybe it'd just be vaguer, the impressions slowly fading as time passed. My surprise at meeting the guinea pig, the shock of watching Paula's dance, and the joy of seeing Charolles's smile—I'd forget it all one day, and we'd all vanish at some point as the world fell to ruin.

I felt a sudden shock. For some reason, I was crying as I boiled the broccoli. *Come on, it's just broccoli*, I scolded myself. Still, the weight on my chest was overwhelming, and I felt almost like I was going to throw up as I glared at the broccoli.

The world was dying. What a late realization.

Back when I'd been traveling alone through it, I'd wanted it to hurry up and die off. And yet now the fact that it would all vanish one day was heart-wrenching and terrifying. Today would never come again, and even the memories of the day would fade away.

The mounds of crystals I'd seen up until now crossed my mind. Those crystals were remnants, the final lingering proof that someone had lived. That would probably be me someday as well. I didn't know how to get home, so I'd end up as crystals just the same as everyone else in this world.

I pressed my head back against the wall, rubbing my skull into the hard surface. These feelings were the same as before, the same ones I'd had when I'd put that gun to my head. I'd been right to give Nito the bullets.

I looked at the watch on my wrist. I was more than good on time, but sitting around not doing anything was only depressing me more and more. I pushed the button, stopping the countdown, and pulled a frying pan out of my backpack.

Once I'd fished out each piece of broccoli from the pot and transferred them to the pan, the pot went on the floor. I replaced it with the frying pan, settling it right over the weak flame. Then I added a glug of oil and fried the chunks of broccoli, crushing them as I did. They still had resistance to them, but they were much softer and broke easily enough due to the extra water they'd absorbed. I added salt and pepper, took them off the heat, and put the pot back.

I decided that the best use of the stock left over from boiling the broccoli was to heat the pasta in it. Pulling out a can of dried pasta from the case, I put it in the once-more boiling water. The pot wasn't big enough to cook for all three of us at once, so I would have to do it a single portion at a time. I used the stopwatch again to keep track of the time as I periodically tested the pasta's hardness. Once it had just a slight bite to it, I moved it to the frying pan. I decided it was fine to add some of the broth in too, which ended up making an amazing soup. After adding fresh pasta into the pot, I stirred the mixture in the frying pan.

"It's done," I said as I scooped it out into bowls.

Nito came over first. She looked at the pasta I'd dished up from the frying pan, and then gave me a—frankly—loaded look.

"There's nothing but green and light yellow here. There's no color balance."

"Could you leave your artistic judgment out of the food?" I asked, though honestly, I had to agree that the color maybe wasn't great.

"It looks very healthy," Charolles cut in.

"Isn't that what you say when you've got nothing else good to say about it?"

Charolles sat next to Nito and I handed her a bowl of her own.

“Here, boiled mashed broccoli pasta.”

They both thanked me and Charolles picked up her fork. She rolled up a forkful of pasta and brought it to her mouth. Nito watched warily.

“Mm,” Charolles mumbled. She swallowed and then spoke bluntly. “That was a surprise the likes of which I’ve never before experienced.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said honestly; it was a big achievement for me.

Nito’s eyes widened from her vantage at Charolles’s side, and she cautiously took a bite of her own. It was quickly followed by a mumble of surprise from her throat.

“It’s only two colors, but it’s so tasty!”

“I told you, taste isn’t based on color.”

Once I saw the two of them eating wordlessly, I picked up my own fork and twined pasta around it, bringing that and a piece of broccoli to my mouth. There wasn’t enough substance to the broccoli to chew—it just melted in my mouth, letting the soup it had soaked up flow over my tongue.

The flavor was simple and slightly sweet. It wasn’t the saccharine taste of sugar, but the natural sweetness hidden within the broccoli. The salt had drawn out that sweetness, and the strong taste of the pasta went well with it. Boiling them in the same water, and then using that leftover broth as a sauce, had unified all the flavors. The unexpected tingling from the bits of pepper that peeked through from time to time within the light flavors tied it all together. It didn’t have the heavy feeling of a rich and satisfying meal, but the savory tastes blended into something very much more than the sum of their parts. It was the kind of flavor that made you want to go back for seconds and then thirds.

I suppose I must be a pasta genius as well. The recipe is just something I found ages ago on the internet, though. Mwahaha.

“Yup, delicious,” I judged.

When I opened my eyes from my self-satisfied haze, Charolles and Nito had both stopped eating and were waiting politely. A glance at their bowls showed them empty.

“You two sure ate fast.”

“Well, it was delicious!” Nito defended.

“I enjoyed the taste as well.”

There was no misunderstanding the silent urging for seconds behind those words. I checked my stopwatch and saw that it was time for the next batch of pasta to be done, so I scooped it up into the frying pan.

5

I awoke with a start.

A faint beam of moonlight was drifting in through a crack in the curtains. Woolly-headed, I checked my watch and saw that it was the dead of night. Past the easel that stood between our beds, Nito was curled up around her bedding. She must have been up until late, either reading or painting; I didn’t even remember saying good night to her, so I must have gone to sleep first.

I let my head fall, burying my face into the pillow. My eyes were gradually getting lighter, though, and I was already fully awake. I knew I probably wouldn’t be able to sleep again for a while, so I got up. My throat was dry. I took out the canteen in my bag, but its lightness in my hand reminded me that it was completely empty. I’d used all the water to boil the pasta.

Shoes on, my phone and the canteen in each of my hands, I left the room as quietly as possible. The corridor, and the temple as a whole, were bathed in soft moonlight, giving the place a peaceful atmosphere. I used the flashlight on my phone to find my way outside. Once I reached the Kettle, I pulled a water tank down and refilled the canteen before drinking my fill.

I sighed, surveying the quiet streets of the village below. Only the roofs were clearly visible, standing out against the night. The lake glistened in the distance, catching the light of the moon. It wasn’t the blinding radiance I’d seen during the day, but more like the sparkling of sand as you scattered it through the air. Out in the middle of the lake was a dark silhouette, a trail of ripples following it. A small boat, I guessed, floating on the water. I looked bemusedly out at the scene—one that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a hauntingly mysterious

painting. The boat was completely stationary in the middle of the lake. Was it the guinea pig?

It wasn't the maudlin feelings the broccoli had inspired that dragged me along now. *Or so I'd like to think.* I was wide awake and oddly restless, so I didn't feel like going back to bed. I'd just seen a convenient distraction that I could use, and it wasn't a bad excuse for a nighttime drive. I drained my canteen and lit the Kettle's boiler, then climbed up on the hood and settled in to wait, watching the boat floating on the lake. After about twenty minutes, the Kettle was finally ready. I climbed down, got into the driver's seat, and drove out of the courtyard surrounding the temple.

The Kettle's headlights cut a path ahead of me through the dimly lit night. The more overgrown area closer to the lake was pitch black, and it took a fair bit of courage to keep driving through it. If I hadn't already made the trip once during the day, I might have turned back. I continued along the essentially straight road and then suddenly broke from the trees.

The entertainment district spread out before me, rising abruptly out of the forest. The open ground was lit evenly by the moonlight, exposing full buildings to my gaze. These had all been places of merriment once, hidden away among the trees, almost like a secret base for adults with too much time on their hands. The place felt all too lonely now, though, what with them having fallen to ruin.

I drove past the theater and passed back into the trees. After I'd gone by several residences, the lake appeared off to my left. Its entire surface seemed to gleam in the moonlight. While keeping my eyes on the road, I peered through the trees at the lake as best I could, looking for the boat. Before long, though, I was in a more thickly wooded area and once again couldn't see much of anything.

Eventually, I saw a light atop a small hill, like someone had bottled the evening sun. It was a lamp, shining from the window of the farthest house—the guinea pig's house. I drove the Kettle into his driveway and stepped out, my feet crunching on the gravel. Either the trees surrounding me, or the nearby lake, lent a slight chill to the air that brushed against my skin.

I hesitated, considering whether to go into the house or head down to the lake, before eventually heading to the stairs that led down to the shore. The boat had just arrived at the jetty. I used my phone to light up the ground beneath my feet as I picked my way down. The boat had stopped completely, but the small figure sitting in it showed no sign of moving.

Eventually, I got close enough to make out the figure of the guinea pig sitting in the boat in more detail. He was facing me, but looking down, writing something in a small black notebook that lay open on his lap. It didn't seem like he'd noticed my approach.

"Um," I said, after much hesitation.

The guinea pig didn't react at all. I drew in a breath, preparing to speak more clearly this time. As I did so, he pulled the cap off the base of his pen and placed it back over the nib, raising his head.

"What concerns an otherworlder?" he asked.

The breath I'd taken left my mouth as a confused exhalation.

"I'm sorry? What do you mean?" I asked once I'd recovered enough to speak.

He tucked the pen and notebook away in his breast pocket.

"People walking around at night are always those with concerns. Those without any are still abed."

I wanted to argue the point and talk about how many people went out to convenience stores in the night...but this world didn't have those stores. Our cultures were different. Here in this world, it was probably a period of history where people *didn't* really leave their homes at night. Plus, even as I opened my mouth to argue, I got the feeling he might have had a point about why I was out this late.

"Do you have concerns of your own, then?" I asked.

"When you get to my age, nature starts to call throughout the night as well. Hence, my sleeping hours have shortened."

The guinea pig rose from the bobbing boat with practiced movements and started to use a rope to moor it in place. Halfway through, he rose and

beckoned.

“Want to come with me? I’ll treat you to a cup of tea.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, just set off up the stairs.

6

The room he brought me to looked really cozy overall, but as I sat down on one of the plush-looking seats, it turned out to be awfully cramped. It didn’t fit with the refined vibe the space had going for it, and I felt almost out of place. I looked around at the lanterns scattered throughout the room. They filled the space with soft light, like mood lighting. Each of them was finely decorated and seemingly antique. The light played off of the color of the furnishings, giving the whole space a glossy caramel sheen.

The guinea pig came back from the kitchen and placed a round tray on the wooden coffee table. On it sat a fine china teapot decorated with a complicated pattern, along with two matching cups and their saucers. The finely detailed tea set was a little at odds with the image I’d gotten of the guinea pig so far. As I reflected on this, he poured tea into the cups, sending steam blooming up into the air alongside a sweet fragrance.

Then he did something strange. He took a lighter from his pocket and began heating the tip of a teaspoon.

“This is a way of drinking tea that only people with money and boredom to spare partake in. Do you know it?” he asked.

Obviously, I shook my head. I had more time than I knew what to do with, so the boredom was one thing, but I had no money. Plus, I wasn’t exactly the most knowledgeable about tea.

The guinea pig rested the heated teaspoon across the top of one cup and then placed a sugar cube in its bowl. Then he picked up a small bottle from the tray, its label showing an image of feathers and a man wearing a tipped hat. The bottle itself was transparent, and its contents looked like liquid amber. The cork came out with a cheerful pop, and then he poured the liquid over the sugar cube. It overflowed from the small teaspoon, and the characteristic heady scent

of alcohol prickled at my nose.

As the edges of the cube started to dissolve in the booze, the guinea pig once again brought the lighter flame toward it. The alcohol pooled in the teaspoon lit up with a blue flame. The flame was weak and looked like the slightest puff of wind would extinguish it, even as it engulfed the sugar cube. The cube got smaller and smaller, looking for all the world as if it were an ice cube melting into the alcohol it was floating in. Drops fell from the edge of the spoon, sending ripples through the tea beneath it.

The flame died out abruptly, the sugar cube having completely dissolved into the alcohol. The mixture in the spoon looked like sherbet. The guinea pig grabbed it by its handle, quietly submerged it in the tea, and stirred it delicately throughout. When he took the spoon out, the sugar and alcohol were both completely gone. He offered me the cup, and I took it, sniffing its rich fragrance. It wasn't the thick scent of alcohol, but more the tangy sweetness that I associated with fermented fruits.

"This is an old way of drinking tea that they used to call 'Noble's Tea.'"

"Um, I've never drunk alcohol before," I admitted.

"Don't worry, I won't tell your mother."

I laughed at that, relaxing a bit. I knew that when cooking with wine and such you burned off most of the alcohol in the process, so the fire would probably have done much the same thing. Besides, there hadn't been much alcohol there to begin with. Chanting those almost-excuses in my mind, I took a sip of the hot tea.

"Huh... It's delicious."

"It would appear that you also have a noble bearing," he said.

"There's a bitterness to it, but the fragrance is amazingly sweet, or maybe 'deep'? ...It's a mature flavor."

The guinea pig poured his own cup and put the spoon across it. He didn't add the sugar this time, just the alcohol, before lighting it. He also tipped it in without waiting for the flame to extinguish. *I guess that's a less sweet, more alcoholic way to drink it*, I reflected as I watched him and sipped from my own

cup. The sugar dissolved in the tea, along with the dash of alcohol, was enough to ease the stiffness in my body. Relaxing my rigid posture and leaning back into the springy cushioning of my seat made me feel like I was finally part of the room.

“Um, can I ask your name?”

“It’s Monterachet.”

“I’m Keisuke. Sorry to disturb you so late at night.”

Despite his clipped way of speaking, I knew he was making me welcome. The cozy atmosphere of the room matched his own.

“Monterachet,” I began, but he interrupted.

“Monty is fine. Saves time, and it’s easier to say.”

I was slightly taken aback, but then I smiled. It was the first time someone had asked me to address them differently for a reason like that.

“Monty, then. Uh, what were you doing on the lake?” I asked.

He hadn’t had a fishing rod with him like the first time we’d met. All I’d seen was him writing something in his notebook. Monty placed his cup down on its saucer and stroked his long whiskers between his fingers, beady eyes considering me.

“I was spacing out.”

“Excuse me?” I blurted without meaning to.

I’d heard him properly, and I could understand what he meant. It was just such an unexpected answer.

“I get lost in thought, I ponder, I navel gaze—use whatever phrase for it you like. I find ‘spacing out’ to be appropriate.”

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts together into an actual question.

“You’re doing that in the middle of the night? At this hour?”

“Exactly.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I took a sip of the—actually quite rich

—tea.

“Have you never done it?” he asked.

What? Spaced out in a boat late at night?

“I...haven’t had the pleasure, no.”

“You should try it, then. Time spent thinking about nothing of consequence is vital.”

“Thinking about nothing of consequence?” I parroted.

“You can’t space out if you’re looking for something specific from your thoughts.”

Well, that is indeed true, I suppose.

“And you go out on the lake at night to do that?”

“It holds a charm you’ll understand if you try it.”

That laconic explanation was far more intriguing than a long diatribe on its benefits would’ve been. I suppose you could say it was a matter of piquing my interest.

“Also,” Monty added, “if you’re going to worry anyway, the solitude is nice.”

I could tell the comment was something akin to curt encouragement from him. He’d already figured out that I was worrying.

“Am I that transparent?” I asked.

“Smiths know their metal, chefs their food, and shepherds their flock. Anyone would notice things others wouldn’t within their own specialty.”

“And what’s your specialty?” I asked.

He picked up the teapot and topped up his drink, giving a single word in reply.

“People.”

I thought his answer over carefully, scratching my temple. It was like a quiz.

“So are you a politician or something?”

“A fine idea. I’m nothing so grandiose, though.”

“A con man, then?”

“Wonderfully done,” he said, raising his cup to me.

“Uh... I was joking.”

“Of course, I’m not actually a con man. It isn’t a matter of social acceptability, but more a matter of capability. You have an incisive mind, though—neither profession can be done well without knowing people.” Monty blew the steam from his tea and took a sip, talking again once he was done. “A second-rate deceiver becomes a con man. A first-rate deceiver becomes a politician. I am nothing more than a third-rate deceiver. In other words, an author.”

Once again, I didn’t know how to reply. Had that been self-deprecation, a joke, how he really felt? I didn’t have the slightest clue. This was a familiar feeling, one I sometimes got from adults—like they were carrying their words around and bringing them out to play with. Replying to the literal meaning in comments like these always ended in the conversation shuddering to a stop. It was like the strange slang used by high school girls; adults also had their own unique dialect.

Still, even if I didn’t know the right answer, I couldn’t just remain silent.

“Perhaps being an author is third-rate in terms of actually being able to deceive a person, but isn’t it a far better profession than being a politician or a con man because the deceit isn’t malicious?”

It was the first time that I’d ever met an author. Obviously, he didn’t have the word tattooed across his forehead or anything, but it felt almost like meeting some mystical creature in a daydream.

“Politicians live for glory, con men live for profit. Authors simply live for their curiosity. For instance, I am interested in what an otherworlder like you has concerns over. Would you be willing to sate that curiosity?”

“You’d ask someone what they were worried about out of pure curiosity?” I asked, after a shocked pause.

“Would you trust someone that said they could save you from your worries, that they could give you the answer?”

I bit my lip. He was right, even if I didn't want to admit it to him. You worried about something because you didn't know the solution to your concerns. Some random person wouldn't be able to solve them out of nowhere. Asking out of pure curiosity was perhaps more honest, and more pleasant as well.

"Still, I don't quite know what to say," I answered, fumbling for words. "It's hard to explain. It's like my emotions are all jumbled up."

"Such a thing would indeed cause concern. Not understanding your worry is definitely a problem. The first step to solving it would be to make the issue clear to yourself."

"Do all authors think that convolutedly?"

"Most of our work is sitting in gloomy contemplation. Actually writing the words down is nothing more than a means to an end."

That felt like a bit of an overstatement, but it wasn't as if I knew any other authors to ask, so I couldn't really comment on it. I considered my feelings for a while, but I couldn't find a specific problem that I could sum up in a phrase, so I just spoke plainly, as words came to me.

"Why did this world fall?"

"Specifically?"

I paused for a beat, then simply parroted back the exact same word.

"'Specifically'?"

"Do you want to know the material cause, or are you being more abstract? Some people believe the forces that rule over the world are beyond human ken. Some of the most religious even called this a sign of the world's salvation."

"I'd like to know any of those reasons, to be honest."

Most of its people had already vanished by the time I came to this world. I'd come to understand it was due to something called the mana collapse, but what process or phenomenon had led to that was still beyond me.

Monty leaned back into his seat, folding his hands in front of his stomach.



“Unfortunately, it is rather difficult for me to give you a definitive answer. Countless scholars researched it, but they all died before coming to a conclusion. Various theories came about, but none of them were proven. The general thought was that the mana throughout the world went out of balance and simply started a breakdown of established natural forces.”

“Does the balance of mana have something to do with magic?”

“Mana still exists. It fills the air and dwells within everyone and everything. Magic is merely a technique of putting the power of mana to work. We lost the technique, not the power.”

“So did the mana collapse happen because you lost magic?” I asked after a pause.

“There were certainly people who said so. Other explanations included the idea that it was a deleterious effect of the rise of steam technology. Yet another was that it had nothing to do with us and was simply a change in natural conditions. In the end, it is a mystery none have solved.”

“No one could solve it?”

I sighed. *I suppose I'll never know, then.*

“Do you have an imagination?” Monty asked suddenly.

“Well, yeah...”

“Then you must never have learned to use it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

That had been just a little bit rude of him, I thought. Monty fixed his beady black eyes on mine and spoke steadily.

“The terrifying thing about the mana collapse was that no one could see it coming. If you spend your days pouring water into a glass, then someday it will overflow. In the same way, once your body saturates with mana, it will turn into crystals. You can’t hold anyone in your final moments. Not your parents, or siblings, or children, or friends. You just die.”

I knew what that looked like—waking up and seeing the person you’d been

laughing with the night before suddenly nothing but a mound of crystals. I could remember the chill of finding the pile, the ringing numbness behind my ears. Just remembering it made me want to throw up.

Finally, I understood what Monty had meant about imagination. That same thing had happened all across the world. Pretty much everyone living here had experienced it firsthand. Would there be *anyone* that wasn't sent into desperation by that? Would people not be so desperately afraid that they couldn't focus to do the necessary research? Wouldn't they all have given up from the start, accepted their fate, and decided there was nothing they could do?

I bit my lip and covered my mouth with my hand.

"The learned suffered. They had the knowledge, the will, and the responsibility. The foolish—with no learning, no position, and no influence—were at peace. They didn't know the despair they would need to face. People searched for a method to win against the encroaching ruin facing the world. The vast number of theories is not due to their foolishness but rather to their courage as they spent their scant time left in this world searching for an answer. An answer for the people they would leave behind."

I felt a prickling up my back, like I was lying on wet sand. An inescapable weight laid itself over me. I had never thought of that before.

Monty continued, "We don't know why the world is in ruin. Perhaps one of those theories is correct, but there is no way to tell which one. Whether people understood that fact or not, they accepted their doom, grieved, raged...and many vanished. The survivors will end up the same way, sooner or later."

I grasped for words. "Doesn't... Doesn't that make it all seem empty?"

Putting it into words, I suddenly felt a sense of understanding. That was it: I felt empty. I met people, laughed with them, took on their burdens, and continued my journey. Regardless of what I did, though, I'd someday vanish. What was the point in talking with people if the end was nigh?

"Is there any point to us still being alive if everything's ending?" I asked.

Monty looked quietly back at me.

“It seems you’ve found what you were worried about. I suppose otherworlders aren’t all that different from us.”

Monty stood up slowly and walked over to some shelves in the corner.

“Many people chose suicide over falling apart through the mana collapse,” he continued. “To go on living, we need something more important than money.”

“Right...”

If the path I’d taken had been different, I probably wouldn’t have been sitting here either. I sat, shaken, as Monty returned. He placed the thing he’d picked up off the shelves on the table. It was a tarnished-looking metal box with a padlock hanging off of it.

“For me, that something is inside this box.”

Quiet hung between us for a moment, until I spoke up.

“What is it?”

“It’s a secret.”

I frowned back at him and Monty let out a rumbling laugh.

“You’re mocking me.”

“No. It really does have something inside it... My hope.”

Hope.

It was an ineffable thing, and a word I’d have hesitated to use. The pure, unvarnished nature of it would have made my embarrassment win out if I’d tried to. Monty had said it without any passion or pretension, though, as if doing so were a matter of course.

“I gaze at this box every night before I sleep. The contents are the only thing keeping me going. There is only one thing I can tell you, one piece of advice. Find your box of hope, and lay your heart upon it.”

I looked at the box on the table. I was in some random country in a ruined world, in a village I didn’t know the name of, in a small house by the lake, and on top of the table next to me was a locked box. A box with hope inside it. A smile welled up on my lips.

“I think that’s the best advice I’ve ever gotten,” I told him.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Monty said, softly patting the box before carefully picking it back up. “If you would take your leave, please? I’m a little tired now myself.”

[Keisuke's Notes] Mercian

It used to just be a place for the wealthy to put their summer homes. Somehow or other, though, it developed into more of a resort. I'd have thought people would want to get away from the chaos, but I guess the rich must just hate boredom.

Chapter 3 — Praying to the Rouge from That Day

1

“Keisuke! Do you want to do the Lantern Flower Festival?!”

My eyes flew open. Nito was right in front of my face, taking up all of my vision. Now, I’d just woken up, so I wasn’t entirely sure what was going on. I could see that her eyes were alight, though; she was obviously excited. With that in mind, I didn’t really have a reason to refuse her.

“Why not?”

“I thought you’d say that! I’ll go let her know.”

She whirled around. Her silver hair moved with her and left a shimmering trail in her wake as she flew from the room, leaving the door wide open behind her.

I didn’t feel like I’d had enough rest, thanks to my jaunt the night before. Honestly, I was sorely tempted to go back to sleep, but I knew that if Nito was awake, I must have already overslept by a fair margin. I managed to heave myself upright, but sleepiness still clung to me, tugging at my back as if trying to pull me back down onto the mattress. I flopped my legs over the edge of the bed and slipped into my shoes before standing up. After a good stretch, and a yawn, I managed to feel mostly awake.

Flicking the curtain aside let the sunlight in, and it seared into my eyes. Squinting, I looked out through the window. Dozens of clouds dotted the sky, but there was still plenty of vivid blue up there. The lake was visible just at the edge of my vision, with no boat floating upon it. I thought back to the previous night, my memories of that conversation with Monty hovering on the border between dreams and reality. I knew that it’d actually happened, but the image of it was as tenuous as mist, always evading my grasp.

As I got closer and closer to wakefulness, Nito’s words finally started to stoke my curiosity, and so I called out toward the door.

“What’s the Lantern Flower Festival?”

The door answered with nothing but silence.

“Never mind, guess you don’t know either.”

“Do doors talk in your world?”

“Gah!”

Charolles was peeking in from the corridor. I’d thought for a second that the door really had answered me, but now I wondered if I might have actually preferred that to reality. This was super embarrassing.

“Morning,” I greeted, eventually.

“Good morning indeed,” she answered.

After another pause, I asked her, “Do you know what the Lantern Flower Festival is, by the way?”

“Weren’t you asking this outstanding fellow first?”

“Forget about that already!”

Charolles had a slight smile on her face as she finally explained.

“The old woman mentioned it this morning. Apparently, it’s a traditional festival.”

She never could resist things like that. She’d probably have been on par with any author in terms of her curiosity about things that seemed enjoyable, or interesting, or that were simply new to her.

“Will we be able to hold it with so few people?” I asked.

Including Fago herself, we only had four people that would be taking part. That wasn’t exactly enough to call a festival. Charolles seemed to share my impression of festivals as something attended by lots of people, and she simply shrugged.

“Why don’t you go ask her for the details?” she suggested, gesturing toward the main hall.

“Why are you talking like you’re not going to be involved?”

I walked past her into the corridor, and she followed.

“I’m not fond of all the bustle of festivals.”

“We’ll keep it low-key, then.”

“In that case, I wouldn’t mind joining in.”

“Not that I’m entirely sure what a ‘low-key’ festival looks like.”

“Should you really be admitting that?” she asked.

We kept up our utterly pointless conversation as we left the corridor and entered the main hall. Nito and Fago were standing in front of the saint’s statue.

“Good morning,” I greeted them.

“You’re really doing it?” Fago asked with no preamble, rubbing her pointed nose and looking rather confused at the prospect.

“The Lantern Flower Festival? Why? Is it hard?”

“The preparations aren’t all that extreme, but I’ve definitely never heard of a festival done with only four people.”

“Nor have I,” I admitted.

I glanced at Nito and saw her ears wiggling as she looked at me in abject excitement.

“Well, she certainly seems invested in it, so...” I said, trailing off.

“You’d be the same way if Fago told you about it!” Nito retorted.

“I’d be acting like you?”

I tried to imagine it: my eyes wide, sparkling with innocence and hope; my fists clenched eagerly in front of my chest; leaning forward on the balls of my feet, my entire body displaying my joy at the potential fun to be had.

“Honestly...that image kinda creeps me out,” I muttered.

“It has the same effect on me,” Charolles agreed from beside me, nodding.

“Hey!”

“I was just agreeing with what you said.”

“Someone else agreeing with that kind of thing is different than saying it yourself. It hurts.”

“Boys are so sensitive,” she lamented.

“Could you not look so depressed about that?”

“No,” Nito declared, smacking me on the chest. “We’re talking about the festival right now.”

“Sorry, Charolles distracted me.”

“Of course, how could it be anything else? It’s entirely my fault, yes.”

“That’s not fair...” I mumbled.

I gave her a sidelong glare for trying to play the bigger person here, but Nito had her cheeks puffed up and her fist raised, so I left it at that and quickly turned to Fago.

“So, what happens during the Lantern Flower Festival?”

Fago shook her head in light exasperation as she crouched and pulled her washcloth from the bucket. She began wringing it out as she spoke.

“As I was telling the girls earlier, there’s a flower that grows in this region called the lantern flower. The petals store mana, so if you set them alight, they glow and float around. It’s not something for children to play with, though.”

“They glow and float?”

I could more or less imagine them floating like balloons, but them glowing *and* being flowers on top of that made getting a clear image in my head rather difficult. I directed a glance at Charolles to check if these were a common thing and she answered with a slight shake of her head.

“This area used to produce a large number of mages. People even called it holy ground. Those bizarre flowers are probably related in some way,” Fago said, heaving herself upright and looking up at the statue before continuing. “Long ago, back when this was just a tiny village, there was apparently an epidemic ravaging the area. The country and the regional lord abandoned the

village, and the villagers had no money to call for a physician. Many people died, and the village was on the verge of annihilation. It was then that the Crimson Saint came.”

At that, the rest of us also looked up at the statue. I’d heard about the Crimson Saint from time to time during my travels. Fago carried on with her story.

“She took each villager’s hand in turn and saved all their lives. They each brought out their entire savings to offer as thanks, but she would accept none of it. Just as they worried they’d have nothing to express their gratitude with, a child brought her one of those flowers. They lit it and everyone watched it sparkle and float. She was overjoyed at seeing that. The villagers then all gathered more of them, and when the Crimson Saint left, they used those flowers as lanterns to see her off. Ever since then, they would light the flowers once a year, and it became known as the Lantern Flower Festival. It was a way to continue offering her our thanks.”

What an incredible story, was all I could think. The biggest shock was that it was no fabrication, but the actual truth. There had been a saint, she had saved the village with some strange power, and then the people had continued showing their gratitude over the years. The accumulation of all those people’s earnest feelings had given this temple its holy air.

I didn’t really understand prayers and faith. They seemed awfully unscientific to me. They also weren’t things that I could actively refute, though, and even if I could’ve, I knew that I shouldn’t. The feeling in the air here didn’t come from some logical train of thought; it was something that you felt on your skin and in your heart.

“It’s an important festival, then,” I murmured.

“What are you getting so serious for?” Fago said with a laugh.

I looked up and saw Nito nodding repeatedly to herself, her eyes misty. She must have really taken the story on board emotionally.

“Didn’t you hear this already earlier?” I asked her.

“A good story is good no matter how many times you hear it.”

Well, that's how it is, I thought, not disagreeing. I could now understand her excitement from when she'd come gushing to me about it earlier.

"Let's do it, then," I decided.

"You say that like there's enough of us to actually do it," Fago commented with a raised eyebrow.

"It doesn't need to be a big production, does it? We'll just do what we can to try to let the saint know that you're still here in this village."

Fago cleaned the temple every morning, just like she was doing today. She'd been doing it since before we got there, and I was sure she'd still be doing it after we were gone. I found that genuinely amazing. So, while I didn't know quite how to word it, I wanted that to get through—for Fago's feelings to reach the saint, that is. The Lantern Flower Festival seemed like the perfect event for such a thing.

"I'd really love to do it!" Nito cried out, leaning forward; her enthusiasm seemed almost like a physical force pressing down on Fago.

"Well, if the both of you are so gung ho about it, who am I to say no?"

"We're doing it, then!" Nito exclaimed, a smile blooming on her face that she directed toward me as she clapped in excitement.

"We should get more people involved too," Nito continued, looking between Charolles and me. "There's Fago's acquaintance as well as the people you both met in the theater, right?"

"Right, those two might come if we invite them," I mused, getting the feeling that Paula'd agree on the spot, though I thought Jill might be a bit more reluctant. "I'm not sure about Monty, though. He doesn't seem like he'd be fond of that kind of excitement."

"He wouldn't," Fago agreed. "The years twist us all, but writers are twisted to begin with."

"Do you dislike writers?" I asked with a slightly chagrined smile.

"He's a writer?" Charolles asked, interjecting.

"That's what he told me, at least."

Thinking Fago would probably know more, I looked over at her.

“I think his books sold pretty well in the past, but I’ve never read any of them.”

Charolles didn’t reply, just cast her gaze down at her feet.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she replied eventually. “I’m fine.”

She definitely wasn’t, but I could tell she didn’t want me to pry any further. I just nodded in reply and turned to talk to Nito. “We were going over that way anyway. Why not invite them at the same time?”

Nito’s bright cheer was the only answer I got.

2

When I arrived at the theater with Nito in the passenger seat, I saw that another car had also stopped there. It was facing away from us, and I stopped the Kettle right behind it. Once we’d both gotten out, I took a look into the other car, but there was no one inside. Brushing my hand against the body revealed that it was still warm. They’d either just gotten here or were just about to leave.

Nito, though, didn’t spare the car a glance; she just stood gazing up at the theater.

“Is this the first time you’ve been to a place like this?” I asked, receiving only a nod in return.

Once I’d said it, I vaguely regretted asking for confirmation on something so obvious. I already knew her circumstances, so it was definitely a question born of less consideration than I’d have preferred to use.

“I’ve listened to recordings of concerts and operas. Theaters sometimes appeared in the books I read as well, and I could always connect the descriptions of the voices and music to the real ones I’d heard before. The actual buildings, though, and the kind of atmosphere they’d have, I was *only* able to imagine from the written descriptions.”

For a moment, I just watched her as she gazed up at the theater, letting her soak it in.

“So how’s the real thing compare?” I finally asked.

Nito looked up at me, her eyes curving into a smile.

“It’s won-der-ful!” she declared eventually.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her exaggerated, drawn-out answer.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Is this one a smaller theater?” she asked.

“Probably. I haven’t seen any others here, though, so I can’t say for sure.”

“Do they have them in your world as well?”

“Lots of them. Some could even seat thousands of people.”

She let out a sigh of both surprise and wonderment.

“Incredible. I can’t even imagine that,” she whispered, then said a little louder, “I’m happy just getting to see this one for now.”

She was fidgeting and shifting from foot to foot as she spoke, and I soon realized why.

“You can paint it later. We need to go invite Paula and Jill,” I told her, gesturing toward the entrance before walking in that direction.

“Right,” she agreed reluctantly, drooping as she followed me.

She couldn’t help but lament needing to keep her urge to paint under control. As she passed through the door, though, she forgot her woes and started spinning like a top. She was peering at each and every thing within the lobby. All of it was new to her, and her enjoyment was obvious in her body language. Then, all of a sudden, she stopped with her mouth agape in shock. I wanted to know what could have caused that look on her face, so I followed her gaze, and then my own mouth dropped open.

Paula was hunched over next to the door that led from the lobby to the seats. I already knew her so I could tell who she was, but from Nito’s perspective, she must have looked like some strange man stuffed into a dress and half bent over

in order to peek through the door. Nito's gaze slowly panned over to me and she spoke in a dull voice, her expression somewhat off.

"Let's go back."

"You don't have to look like you've just seen something awful."

Well, not that I couldn't understand where she was coming from. Seeing Paula doing something so bizarre, added to the shadowy atmosphere in the dimly lit theater—anyone was bound to find it weird. At this rate, Nito really *might* have just headed back, so I decided to take the initiative. I walked over toward where Paula was standing, with Nito trailing after me.

"Paula!" I called once I'd reached her side, waving my hand near her face.

"Eeek!" Paula jumped, her blonde hair going flying. "Jeez, Kei! Don't surprise me like that!"

She had her hand on her chest and was gasping for breath, but she wasn't the only one feeling shocked. Her reaction had definitely startled me as well, and her scream had made Nito jump and hide behind me. Obviously, though, Paula had spotted her, and a bright cheer broke the brief silence.

"Would you introduce me to the fine lady behind you?" she asked.

"Please don't eat me?" Nito whimpered.

"I prefer bearded men with a touch of class," Paula assured her.

"No comment," I answered, ignoring the wink she'd sent my way and pulling Nito slightly out from behind me. "This is my companion Nito. Nito, this is Paula."

"My... My name's Nito. Um, it's nice to meet you. Also, I'm sorry for hiding. You surprised me a little."

Paula's eyes widened at Nito's now-much-clearer speech, and then her expression morphed into a smile as she bent down to meet Nito's gaze.

"It doesn't bother me at all. I'm used to surprising people. After all, I've got pretty broad shoulders, don't I?"

I laughed at that joke, and Nito's eyes began to sparkle at the casual wink

Paula tossed her way.

“We can leave the hellos there for a minute,” Paula said. “Come this way. You’ve got great timing.”

She tapped her finger on the door leading farther inside. I assumed that she wanted us to peek through it like she’d been doing. I exchanged a curious glance with Nito and she winked awkwardly back. She must have been trying to imitate Paula’s from earlier. That was so adorable of her that I just had to pat her shoulder, but in return, she buried her fist in my chest. *No mercy from this one, eh?*

I leaned in closer to the door like Paula had indicated, rubbing at my chest. Nito crouched at my feet, also pressing her face up to the door.

“I’m opening it,” Paula said, pulling gently at the handle.

The very instant the door cracked open, I felt an almost physical strike to my temple and a shiver ran down my spine. Issuing forth from behind the door was...song. Now, I’d heard plenty of songs. There were hundreds on my phone. I’d never had a song so deeply engulf me, though. The words echoed through my head, and the sweetness of the voice caressed my ears. It was all so...beautiful.

I suddenly noticed that I’d stopped breathing. The fading edges of my vision and the slight wooziness pulled me back to reality, and I realized that, for a moment, I had been utterly entranced by the song. The feeling of lying in a boat on a lake in the warm spring sun came to mind. The tension left my shoulders, and my heart was at peace. Gradually, my breath returned to me and air slowly filled my lungs. It was all so calming.

If I could, I thought, I’d spend my whole life listening to this.

My eyes had been opened, like I’d spent a long period asleep and had just woken. It was a bizarre combination of oblivion and peace. I felt as if the stagnant feelings in my heart had been washed away and replaced with pure water.

“Amazing, right?”

I couldn’t muster a reply to Paula, just a nod. All I knew was that I’d

experienced something incredible.

At that same moment, Nito shot up. The motion was forceful enough that it knocked me back. She used both hands to push open the door and then darted inside. Paula and I looked at each other as we heard her footsteps fade into the distance.

Soon after, an almost pitiable scream made its way to us from inside.

3

The one singing that wonderful song had, of course, been Jill. Standing in front of her now and seeing her shrinking in on herself in the shadow of a chair made me almost disbelieve it, despite knowing how rude it was to think that. Her voice had been so bold that it had totally bowled us over, after all.

“Jill, the two of them wanted to compliment your singing,” Paula told her softly.

She was sitting in the chair beside Jill. The younger woman just buried her face in Paula’s lap with a mumbling cry and shook her head over and over.

“I did something awful,” Nito muttered sadly from next to me, slumping.

She’d been so enthused that she’d wanted to share her feelings with the singer, but she couldn’t have imagined just how introverted Jill was. When Nito burst in, she had screamed at the idea of someone she didn’t know hearing her song and then immediately slumped across the chair.

“Um, I’m sorry we eavesdropped.” I tried to apologize, but only got a groaning mumble in return.

“This girl... She has such a good voice but just can’t sing in front of people. She reacted the same way the first time I heard her as well.”

Paula looked conflicted as she spoke. It seemed like eavesdropping was the only way to hear Jill’s songs, and that keeping Jill from realizing she had an audience had been for both of their sakes. Then Nito had jumped into the middle of things and thrown it all off. I knew Nito was more than perceptive enough to have realized that herself, and that just telling her not to worry

about it likely wouldn't do any good. She knew exactly what the situation was, and she was curling in on herself more with every passing second.

I needed to do something.

Right now, Jill was reeling from a completely unforeseen shock and couldn't process her feelings, if my guess was correct. Giving her a different shock that was slightly easier to parse might get her back to herself again, and then we could apologize. I moved to stand next to Paula and spoke as softly as I could.

"Jill, we're holding the Lantern Flower Festival in the village. Would you sing there for us?"

The constant shaking of her head finally stopped and she lifted her face to look at me. Her dumbfounded expression and the lack of a reply gave me the impression that she hadn't really understood what I'd said, so I slowly repeated myself.

"Would you sing at the Lantern Flower Festival?"

"Wha... You're holding the Lantern Flower Festival?"

"We are."

"*That* Lantern Flower Festival?"

"That's the one."

She nodded in understanding as my words finally got through to her.

"Ho..."

"Ho?"

"How could I ever do that?!"

Her breath was coming in great gasps as she shook her head so hard that I worried it might fall off. I'd at least somewhat expected it, but the sheer force of her refusal made the lack of room for any negotiation perfectly clear. The idea had come to me when I'd heard her singing, and I thought it was a good one if I did say so myself, but I couldn't force her to sing if she didn't want to.

"Then would you consider just participating in general?"

"I...I wouldn't have to sing?"

She seemed much more willing in that case and looked up at Paula, evidently asking her for a final decision. I relaxed at that point, expecting a positive response, but to my surprise, Paula shook her head.

“It’s a wonderful invitation, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. You should go on your own, Jill.”

Smiles didn’t necessarily mean a good answer. Sometimes they could be a more eloquent refusal than anything else, and the smile currently on Paula’s face was one of those. Her answer wouldn’t have changed no matter how she’d been invited. Jill, still looking at Paula, didn’t fail to catch on to those feelings. She slowly shook her head.

“Then, um, I won’t go either. I’m sorry for saying no after you went out of your way to invite us.”

Even as I voiced a generically polite concession, my mind was on Paula’s reaction. It seemed like she’d answered without even thinking first, and Jill was clearly not happy about declining. Paula must have had some strong reasoning to refuse like that, but asking after it felt a bit too much like prying.

“Jill, you don’t have to worry about me,” Paula told her.

“No, I wouldn’t manage on my own.”

Paula was silent for a moment, then simply gave a resigned, “All right.”

“Sorry, Kei, I hope you don’t mind?” she apologized brightly, turning to me and bringing her hands together in front of her face in a pleading gesture.

“Not at all. I’m sorry for inviting you out of nowhere.”

“Invitations from others are the mark of a fine woman, so it was nice to get one, regardless. I promise I’ll repay it, so let us off this one time, okay?”

This time, her smile wasn’t the uncompromising one from earlier, but a gentler, more fleeting one. It was her (slightly awkward) attempt to negate the uncomfortable atmosphere she’d created.

“I’m looking forward to it. The same goes for men, after all.”

“You really get it, Kei.”

We exchanged looks, making sure neither of us was torn up about this outcome. Through my invitation and her refusal, we'd each touched on a slight sore spot, but there was no malice from either side, so neither of us was unhappy. We'd just gone for a fresh start.

"Oh, Jill, I'll introduce you," I said, changing the topic. It was a bit of a blatant move, but no one in the room would've called me out on it. "This is Nito. We're the best of friends."

I gently tugged the girl in question to my side. Her back was stiff, almost certainly due to nervousness.

"That's me," she said. "I'm sorry for barging in earlier, and for eavesdropping."

Jill panicked at the clear self-recrimination in Nito's voice and waved her hands around in front of herself to refute it.

"No, I should be the one apologizing! I'm sorry you had to hear something so grating. I wou—"

"It wasn't grating!" Nito's voice echoed around the room after her outburst.

Paula and I were both wide-eyed. Jill froze as well, looking blankly at Nito. She'd covered her mouth, apparently just as surprised as we were at how loudly she'd spoken. Her cheeks reddened at being the center of attention, but she clenched her fists and fixed her gaze on Jill.

"It was absolutely, *absolutely* wonderful. I loved your singing. It wasn't grating in the slightest."

She gradually trailed off as she spoke, but she still got the whole thing out before averting her gaze in embarrassment. I was overwhelmed at how much she'd grown. She was unaccustomed to people and very reserved, and yet she'd gotten her thoughts across so firmly! Paula smiled softly at her, before gently poking Jill in the shoulder.

"What do you say?"

"Th-Thank you. I'm happy to hear that."

Jill had carefully considered Nito's feelings and responded sincerely. While the

thanks were exceptionally awkwardly given, they were still effective. Nito cautiously raised her gaze and exchanged a small smile with Jill. It was a conversation rooted in mutual awkwardness.

“Looks like you’ve got a new friend, Jill,” Paula said.

Jill had immediately moved to wave her hand, so I cut her off by speaking to Nito.

“Aren’t you happy about that, Nito?”

“I am,” she answered brightly.

Jill floundered, searching for somewhere to put her hands, before finally clasping them together in front of her chest.

“I-I’m not sure becoming friends with me is a good thing,” she managed haltingly.

“That’s not true,” Nito said, offering her own hands to Jill. “I want to know more about you, and I want you to know more about me. So I want to be friends.”

I had to look up at the ceiling and slap my forehead to keep a hold of myself after hearing that. Honestly, I wanted to leave the room and shout my feelings out. While I was trying to recover, I felt something pat my shoulder. Glancing over, I saw that Paula had come up beside me. She was holding her other hand over her mouth. Even in the darkness of the theater, I could see the film of tears welling up in her eyes as she moved her face closer to mine.

“She’s so pure. Oh, my heart...” she whispered, her voice dipping to the low register of a man’s for the first time I’d ever heard.

I said nothing and just nodded deeply. We were only on the fringes of it and we were in that state. Poor Jill was making a low groan in the back of her throat. Her eyebrows had furrowed and the corners of her mouth had turned down as she screwed her eyes shut. I could see her clenching her teeth. It was the face of someone doing their best not to cry.

“I-I wand do be friends with you doo...”

She might actually have been crying, after all, but Paula and I both had some

dust in our eyes so we couldn't tell. By the time we'd cleaned our eyes, Nito and Jill were hand in hand—a girl and a young woman with just a handful of years between them, now friends.

"I-I'm sorry for that display..." Jill said, lowering her head.

I refuted her comment entirely, but Jill wouldn't accept that. It was a little late now, but it occurred to me that maybe it'd have been better for me to be outside. Having a guy around must have been pretty unpleasant at times like this. At least, for everyone but Paula.

"Come on, Jill, you're all friends now. You can't keep looking at the floor forever."

Jill let out a slight gasp, probably because she didn't remember having made friends with me. I couldn't make an appeal as sincere as Nito's, though, so I had to take advantage of Paula's phrasing.

"It's great to have more friends, but we've got to go for now."

"Oh, you won't stay to watch me dance?"

"There's someone else I want to invite to the festival. He's called Monty. Do you know him? Up by the lake."

"Yeah, the thunder rat," Paula replied, face twisting.

"You have history?"

"He yelled at us constantly as kids. Well, it *was* our fault for messing with him in the first place, but I'm still not comfortable around him."

The word "yell" was far from what I'd expected.

"But he's seemed so calm most of the time..."

"He used to be different. When his daughter got ill and died, he lost all his energy."

That wasn't information I'd gone looking for, and I felt almost guilty for knowing it. Finding out something like that without the person in question being around wasn't great. Paula let out a gasp as well and put a finger over her lips.

“Getting too chatty is all part of getting old. Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

I nodded silently.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I think you’ve got your work cut out for you. He’s not one for big gatherings like that.”

“I had a feeling he wasn’t,” I said with a wry smile.

Still, asking didn’t cost anything. I told Paula and Jill we’d come again sometime, and then we left the theater.

4

The sky was still a vivid blue, the early morning sun shining brightly through it. White clouds stood out against the blue, each dotted with tinges of gray that drifted across their surfaces like oil over water. I directed the Kettle out from among the villas and up the gentle slope, bringing an old-looking deep-blue roof into sight.

“There’s the house,” I commented.

As we got closer to Monty’s house, a trike came toward us, heading in the other direction. Its rider was, of course, Charolles. She looked so cool riding stretched out over it that both of us in the car let out murmurs of wonder.

I’d offered to let her come along with us, but Charolles had refused. Realizing she must have come to see Monty on her own, I had a sudden thought and pulled over to the side. She slowed her own vehicle and then came to a stop at our side. I wound the window down and spoke.

“We’re heading up there now. I guess you’re going back?”

“I am. I’m done here already,” she answered.

Her goggles were hiding half of her face, so I couldn’t see her expression very well. From what I could see, she looked the same as normal, but something *felt* different.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“You’re worried about me? That’s kind of you.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

Charolles took her hands off the handlebars and looked straight at me. The glass in one of her goggles reflected my face, while I could see through the other to her eye. I couldn’t read the emotions that were in that eye, though.

“I’m fine, thanks. I’ll head on back ahead of you.”

She didn’t wait for a reply, just grabbed hold of the handlebars again and took off. Moments later, she disappeared into the shadows of the forest along with the gentle burbling of her exhaust.

“I wonder what’s wrong with her?” Nito mused.

“So she did seem weird.”

If Nito thought so too, then it wasn’t just me misreading things. The business Charolles was “done” with probably had something to do with it, and it was probably related to Monty in some way. Unease fluttered in my chest like flames licking at the bottom of a simmering pot as I drove the Kettle onward.

I stopped in front of Monty’s house and got out, with Nito close behind. We stood together in front of the door as I knocked. No reply was forthcoming. Even after I gave a slightly louder knock, there was a pause before the door opened.

“So it’s you this time. It’s just one guest after another. I wonder how many years it’s been since I had this many.”

Nito let out a small gasp as she looked up at him. His gaze fell and met Nito’s, and... *I think he might have laughed?*

“Oh, your guardian’s with you.”

“How old do you think I am?” I asked.

I hadn’t expected a joke from him.

“Come on in. I was just brewing some tea. I’ll listen to what you have to say over a cup.”

We followed his beckoning and, once inside, Nito slowly took in the living room. She seemed to be focused on the quality of the furniture. That was

where my attention went too, even with this being my second time inside the room. The sunlight coming in from the window lit the room brightly, and it felt completely different than it had in the warm orange light from the night before. While we were busy staring, Monty came into the room carrying a tray with a teapot and cups on it.

“What are you two standing around for? I suppose I’ll have to tell you, the seats are over there,” he said, gesturing with his pointed nose.

“Sorry for the sudden visit,” I apologized.

“I don’t mind. I welcome anything but bad news.”

Monty brewed the tea with familiar motions and then put a cup in front of me. There was no bottle of spirits like there had been yesterday, just a small bowl of sugar cubes and a small container of orange jam.

“Thank you,” I said.

I’d enjoyed his hospitality the night before as well, so I was less reserved than Nito. I dropped a sugar cube into my cup, then stirred in a spoonful of the jam as well. After that, Nito also added a sugar cube to hers, and we spent some time enjoying our tea.

“So, did you two simply have too much time on your hands and come to chat with an old man?”

Even as I smiled ruefully at the indirect request to get to the point of our visit, I put my cup down.

“I have two things I wanted to ask of you.”

“That’s better than one. Now, even if I refuse one, it invites less blame.”

“We’ve actually decided to hold the Lantern Flower Festival and wanted to know if you’d join in.”

“What was the other thing?” he asked.

“Charolles—the girl that was just here—seemed slightly off, so I was hoping you could give some insight into why, if you didn’t mind.”

Monty hummed as he sipped his tea.

“I don’t do well with lively events. So, while it has been very long since the last one, I will not be participating in the festival. I do thank you for taking the time and effort to invite me, however. As for the girl, that is not something for me to discuss at my own discretion. It concerns her personal circumstances, so ask her instead.”

It was a blunt answer, but he’d stated both his reply and his reasons clearly, so it ended up feeling more uplifting than vexing. I could only nod in agreement with what he’d said about Charolles, and I could at least relax knowing that there wasn’t a specific problem between the two of them.

“So, purely out of curiosity,” he continued, “why are you holding it now?”

“There’s no deep meaning behind it,” I said, smiling self-consciously again. “If I had to name a reason, I’d say it’s because of *Nito’s* curiosity.”

I gestured toward her and she straightened in her seat, nodding nervously. She was acting like a student called to the principal’s office.

“Well then, it has to be done,” Monty said decisively. “My apologies for not taking part, little miss.”

“I-It’s fine... Actually, can I ask you something?” she said, pausing until he nodded. “You know Fago, right?”

“She’s probably the person I’ve known the longest, in fact. How is she?”

“Um, she’s well. She cleans the temple every morning and prays.”

“I see,” he answered shortly.

Despite the brevity of the response, there was quite a bit of meaning packed into it, and it left an odd echo in my mind. Seeming to notice my curious look, Monty leaned back into his seat. He crossed his hands over his stomach and turned his face toward the window.

“Have either of you ever prayed?” he asked.

Nito and I gave each other a look, and she was the one that answered.

“What kind of prayers?”

“There are many kinds. Prayers are given as thanks before a meal or after a

good harvest, as pleas for something the person wants, as respect to the dead... There are countless types of prayers, but those that pray the longest and hardest are always those repenting.”

“Because they did something wrong?”

Monty’s beady eyes found Nito’s.

“That’s right, little miss. People that pray aren’t the only ones that do bad, though. Everyone sins in one way or another. The difference is in realizing your own sin and facing it. You see, prayers are nothing more than introspection. You sit before an invisible presence, speak with an inaudible voice, and thereby spend your days looking inward. That brings more pain than any judgment from another could.”

“So Fago prays in repentance?” I asked.

Monty simply shook his head.

“These are nothing more than my own musings, not a certainty. However, think hypothetically. If her mornings are dedicated to repentance, and yet there is no one to hear that prayer...would such a life not be pointless?”

His gaze as he turned to me felt expectant, like he wanted some kind of response. I wasn’t sure how to answer, though. I’d never prayed, for repentance or otherwise. I also didn’t know much about Fago.

“I don’t think praying is a waste, though,” Nito answered.

“Even if no one is there to hear the prayers?”

“You never know when a prayer or wish might be granted.”

“That’s a rather optimistic viewpoint.”

“Mine was granted. So prayers...even if they seem like impossible wishes, are a good thing, I think.”

It was an emotional argument rather than a logical one, and yet Monty didn’t refute it. That was probably because it contained so much of her personal feelings. It was an opinion born of her own experiences, so it didn’t need to be logical. Monty just snorted in amusement, nodding slightly.

“Go tell that to her,” he said, his tone shockingly soft; it felt almost too affectionate for mere acquaintances.

“What kind of relationship do the two of you have?” I asked.

“We have simply known each other for a long time,” he said, neatly deflecting the question.

There was a mysterious sense of tension between the other two as we finished our tea. After we left the house, Nito and I gave each other a troubled glance and a vague smile as we stood together in front of the Kettle.

“Everyone turned us down,” I commented eventually.

“They did...”

I’d thought that even if Monty wouldn’t turn up, Paula and Jill would.

“Guess it’s just the four of us.”

“That makes me a bit sad...”

I agreed. I’d thought the Lantern Flower Festival would be a great opportunity to add a little color to a mostly boring existence. She was right, though—a festival with only four people felt almost pitifully small.

“Fago, Paula, Jill, and Monty... They all live so close together, but they don’t seem to have anything to do with each other,” Nito commented, her shoulders slumping.

I wasn’t sure how to console her. They lived in such close proximity and yet held each other at arm’s length. It must have felt wrong to Nito, and I was reluctant to just wave it off as being how adults were sometimes.

Just then, something occurred to me and I hurried back to the door. I knocked again and Monty soon appeared to open it.

“Did you want another cup of tea?” he asked.

“Ah, no, but thank you for the offer. I realized I forgot to ask something,” I told him, before voicing my question. “Do you remember a Paula? Apparently, you used to yell at her for messing with you in some way.”

His reaction was beyond anything I’d expected.

[Keisuke's Notes] The Lantern Flower Festival

The Crimson Saint apparently came to this village long ago, and the festival began as a way of thanking her. It's got a deeper meaning than just enjoying a night of fun, it seems. Maybe the lantern flowers each carry prayers with them.

Chapter 4 — Amethyst Eluded by Dawn

1

As I stepped through the door into the theater hall, the high midday sun shining down from the windows on the ceiling cut sharp lines across the rows of seats. Paula was sitting in a seat about midway down. I didn't make any effort to call out to her, just walked up and sat down at her side. Nito took the seat on my other side.

Paula spared us a glance before turning her gaze back to the front of the hall. Nito and I joined her in staring at the uncurtained stage.

"It was in the summer I turned ten, just after this theater was founded," she began. "One of my friend's parents became a cleaner here and used to sneak us kids in when there wasn't much of a crowd."

She paused, but I didn't turn to look back at her, and I didn't try to reply. I just had a feeling that was the best option to take.

"I still remember the first time like it was yesterday. That dancer's dress sparkled under the lights, her arms and legs glided through the air, and her stiletto heels were just... It was like she was riding a horse made of music, and it was absolutely gorgeous. I wanted to be like that too—my arms and legs flying through the air."

"So then you made it your job?" I asked after a short pause.

She snorted. It wasn't a snort of derision at anyone else; it had only the soft puff of self-deprecation.

"I was just a tailor. It was a tiny store, and my usual takings were twelve belk a week. The closest I ever got was putting on a show in the local bar on weekends, dancing and making some spare change. Most of what came flying across the dusty floor was half-eaten bread from the drunkards, maybe a copper or two. The lights and the dress that I so longed for back then were all

nothing more than dreams.”

I nodded along as she spoke, until eventually she paused again. Just like earlier, I waited for her to continue.

“I knew I’d gone too far as soon as I said it,” she admitted at length. “You asked the thunder rat about it, didn’t you?”

“And he told us Paula was his daughter’s name. Along with the fact that she’d died years ago,” I answered, finally turning to face her. I had no idea if my expression was as rife with confusion as my mind was, but I was dying to know. “Why do you have a dead girl’s name? It’s no coincidence, is it?”

“Of course not. She was my best friend, after all. Back when I first said I wanted to become a dancer, and even when I was wrestling with the fact that I was a man that had the heart of a woman, she was the only one that took me seriously.” Paula turned her gaze away from where it’d been fixated on the stage and gave me a searching look. “Kei, you never denied or rejected me when you first saw me. Your expression didn’t even change... Why is that?”

“Well, I guess ’cause it’s kinda normal?”

I’d seen people before that didn’t feel like they matched their body, in documentaries, TV shows, movies, and so on. Paula was the first I’d gotten to know personally, but that was no reason to reject her.

“Normal...?”

Paula’s eyebrows dropped and she gave a suspicious frown. Nito poked her head around from my other side and explained.

“Keisuke is an otherworlder, so he doesn’t have the same values as people from this world.”

“Oh!” Paula exclaimed, her eyes widening as she covered her mouth in shock and leaned her face close to mine. “You’re so incredible, Kei! I’ve never met an otherworlder before!”

“I don’t think it’s all that impressive,” I deflected, unsure how to react to being treated like some kind of celebrity.

“That otherworld is a whole *other world*,” she insisted. “Are there outcasts

like me living loud and proud in your world?”

“Well...some people are loud and proud, but I think there are others who just live their lives. There’s definitely still discrimination and prejudice, but I’m pretty sure it’s getting more and more accepted as normal.”

If I’d known I would be asked about this kind of thing one day, I’d have looked into it more and been able to give her a better picture. Unfortunately, I could only offer vague platitudes. Paula put her hands to her chest and slowly shook her head as she took in what I’d said.

“So there really is a world like that,” she said after a moment. “A world where people like me can just *live*. That sounds...wonderful.”

My heart tightened at her expression. Here was someone who viewed the society I’d taken for granted my whole life as something radiant and enviable. There were people out there that would want such a thing more than I could ever imagine, and I had never even noticed.

“I wish this world could have grown into something like that, but it fell before it had the chance,” Paula said, then laughed softly. “Maybe that was for the best, though. It wasn’t a world I could live in with any ease, and there was no hope for my future either.”

“But didn’t you dream of dancing on stage?” Nito asked hesitantly.

Paula smiled gently back at her.

“Of course I did. But I’m old enough to know there’s a difference between dreams and reality, and I’d given up. This theater might be a decaying husk, but it’s still more than I deserve.”

Nito made to say something but I put my hand on her knee to stop her. Whatever she or I said, it would have been meaningless to Paula. I knew that nothing we could think of here in this moment would be new to her. We all had things in life that we believed in, wished for, and held on to with all our strength, but then gave up on once we realized there was no real hope.

“Paula, why did you come back here?” I asked.

“Well, I wanted to dance on this stage,” she replied.

“Back when we first met—when you stopped my car—you asked about the village, didn’t you?”

Thinking back on it, the way she had acted that day didn’t fit her at all. I started going over other details: she’d been friends with Monty’s daughter, she’d lived around here as a child... The photo I’d seen suddenly came back to my mind.

“Are you Fago’s...” I half asked.

It was more of a shot in the dark than a well-reasoned guess driven by any real certainty. The boy in Fago’s photo hadn’t looked anything like Paula, and on top of that, Fago had told me that he was dead. Even I barely believed it was possible, but I just had to ask.

Paula didn’t answer me out loud. All she did was give a single, tearful nod. Nito gasped, the sound awfully loud as it cut through the silence around us.

“Th-Then why don’t you go to her and—” From there, she let out a stream of rapid-fire half-formed questions, flapping her hands around emphatically.

I knew that she wanted to ask why Paula didn’t go and check in on Fago. There was another question that needed answering first, though.

“Does Fago know you’re here?”

She shook her head.

“I can’t face her now.”

“But she’s your mother,” Nito protested.

Paula directed a lonely smile toward the younger, smaller Nito.

“Dad was pretty pissed when I admitted I wanted to live as a woman and become a dancer. I wouldn’t budge, though, and eventually I got disowned. I’m not their son anymore.”

She gestured at herself.

“I mean, look at me,” she added derisively. “How can I just turn up looking like this and say, ‘Remember me? I’m your kid!’?”

“But...but you’re so close, and...” Nito’s voice got progressively quieter as she

spoke, before she was eventually too quiet to hear.

“Thank you, Nito. You’re a sweet girl. I’m sorry, though...I’m a coward. All I can ever imagine is her turning away and saying, ‘I don’t know you. My son is dead.’”

“But that’s just...”

“Right, it’s just me imagining how it might go. But if that really did happen... That’s what I always think, and I can’t take the fear. If the alternative’s dying in despair, then I’d rather keep living like this. Once mom turns to crystals, I’ll regret not reconnecting with her, sure. Or maybe I’ll even go first. Either way, it’s better than the alternative. That’s why I can’t go to the festival, even though I really want to.”

The bright tone in her voice was definitely there for our sake. Her strength, and the *need* for her to have that strength, put a lump in my throat. The world was in ruins, all but ended. Each and every person was vanishing one by one, not knowing if tomorrow would ever come, but even then, mother and child could not necessarily understand each other. *But this is the end*, I thought. *I just want someone to fix it*. I didn’t care if it was the saint, a god, or even a hero. Anyone would do.

How could I comfort Paula? If Fago found out the truth, would it go well? Did I even have the right to decide something like that? No answers were forthcoming to my worries, so I remained silent. Then, cutting into my thoughts, Paula spoke to us.

“Come on, don’t make those gloomy faces. The most precious thing in life is a smile.”

2

No conversation passed between Nito and I during the ride back to the temple. The same thoughts were probably going through both of our heads, but it seemed that neither of us could come up with a clear path to follow.

Charolles’s trike was sitting outside as we drove up, despite usually being nowhere to be seen. I pulled the Kettle up alongside it, and we got out and

headed inside. The saint's statue was standing in the main hall as it always did; we went past her and down the corridor. The door to the library was open, and a peek through it revealed Charolles sitting in one of the chairs at the table. I waited for a moment, before calling out to her.

"What's up?"

"Welcome back," she replied. "I've been waiting for you two."

The room seemed awfully empty to me, and I soon realized why. The piles of books had all been returned to their shelves. Before I could wonder at that, Charolles stood up and walked toward us, taking a thick book from her magic bag and offering it to us. I accepted it readily, but noticed that it was shockingly heavy.

"You can have it."

"That's great, but what *is* it?"

The leather-bound book was covered in scuffs and looked positively ancient. Constant rough treatment over the years must have battered it.

"It's a map. You were looking for one, right?"

"You found it?" I asked.

"That's the courier's map I inherited," she said, shaking her head. "There isn't a map in this library, or so the author said."

"What? Monty?"

"Yes. He said that he's read every book in here, so there's no point in searching anymore."

"That's why you're giving us yours? It must be important to you, though."

Considering she'd said she *inherited* it, it must have been an accumulation of some kind of ancestral knowledge, not just some simple map.

She shook her head, though, simply saying, "I don't need it anymore. There's no point in us couriers continuing our work, so it's of no use to me."

"You're searching for that story, though, aren't you? Don't you use it for that?"

“I’m done with that too,” she said.

All I could do was let out a dumbfounded “Huh?”

“The author knew it. Apparently, there isn’t an ending to it in the first place. It was an incomplete book written by a hobbyist... That kind of thing happens quite often. A book starts out being written for fun, but the author tires of it before it’s finished.”

I knew it. I’d had a feeling when we passed each other on the way to Monty’s that she’d gone to ask him about the story. An author was definitely the best person to ask about a story, and I was surprised I hadn’t thought of it the night before. My mind had just been preoccupied with my worries about myself, apparently.

“Monty knew it, though... You’re really sure? It’s definitely the right one?”

“It is. He even knew what happened in it.”

Whether it really was the right book or not, this was all too sudden. My brain wasn’t great at the best of times, but having this sprung on me out of nowhere had robbed me of the ability to string a decent sentence together, and so I remained silent. Nito had been standing quietly beside me with her mouth agape through all this, but now she stepped forward and looked up at the taller girl.

“Charolles, are you leaving?”

Charolles crouched down and met Nito’s gaze.

“I suppose so, yes. Now I know that what I was looking for doesn’t exist, after all.”

That sentence hung in the air, a stifling weight in the small room.

“Wh-Where are you going?!” Nito demanded.

“I haven’t decided. I’ve spent all this time looking at the map, carrying my things from place to place, and searching for something or someone. Now that I don’t have any of that, I don’t know what to do with myself or where to go.”

Nito pressed her lips tightly together, her brows furrowing. It seemed like she might start crying at any moment. Charolles gently reached out to stroke her

cheek.

“Don’t make that face. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

The two of them held each other’s gaze for a while, but then Charolles abruptly averted her eyes and stood up.

“You’re looking for a place, aren’t you? It’s better for you to have it than me. It’ll actually be useful for you.”

She gave me a glance and then moved past us both. Nito spun around in a tizzy and called after her.

“You’re going right now?!”

“Oh, well, we’re doing the Lantern Flower Festival, aren’t we? I want to join in too.”

“But...you just...”

Charolles looked blankly back at her and then seemed to realize how her actions had seemed from an outside perspective. She snorted.

“Sorry about that. I was just going to go check my trike over.”

“It was very ambiguous...” I commented before letting out a sigh of relief. That had all felt like the lead-up to a farewell, so I’d also thought she was about to leave for good.

“Oh my, were you going to miss me as well?” Charolles asked teasingly.

“Not at all. Not even the slightest, most minuscule amount,” I replied with the harshest frown I could muster.

“Well, that’s a shame,” she replied nonchalantly, before heading out down the corridor.

Nito’s eyes remained fixed on her back as she left. I dropped my own gaze to look at the book in my hands and let out another sigh through my nose. Partings followed meetings. That was the unfortunately inevitable nature of the world, but it was still hard to bear. Everything changed eventually, and we had no way of stopping it.

“The Lantern Flower Festival, huh?” I mused.

We four would be the only participants, and once it was over, Charolles would be moving on down a different path. It was shaping up to be a rather lonely festival, in my opinion. Even I was feeling down about it, so of course Nito's deflated spirit was painfully obvious. She adored Charolles, so the suddenly much-closer parting must have weighed even more heavily on her.

"Are you okay?" I ventured hesitantly.

"I had it all wrong..." she murmured. "In stories, you get all sorts of suffering and sadness, but everyone does their best and things go well in the end. They find what's precious to them and end up happy... I thought real life would be the same way, that if you believed and tried hard, your wishes would be granted and there'd be a smile on your face."

If reality *were* that way, then it would be the best thing ever. I'd have felt better about laughing at all the adults who said stories were stories *because* they didn't happen in real life. Reality wasn't so kind, though. I knew that, and now so did Nito.

"Reality is much harsher than fiction," she told me, looking up with a wan smile. "I don't know why people smile, and I have no idea what I can do to *put* those smiles on their faces. I've read so many books and know so many things, but I still don't know anything about helping people get through their pain and suffering."

Her gaze gradually drifted downward as she spoke, until she was staring at her feet.

"There are people here suffering, but the only thing we can really do is watch? We can't use magic like the saint, so we can't help anyone?" she asked.

Maybe it would make her feel better to say there was something she could do? I wondered. *Even if neither of us knows what that something is.*

She seemed so blindingly bright to me, in how she'd worry and suffer so much for someone she'd only just met, and truly want to help them. She seemed fragile too, though. It was like her heart was made of spun glass: beautiful, but far too easily cracked.



I wished I had some witty remark to offer her. All boys in high school would be better served by learning not equations in math, not the past-progressive tense in English, but words to comfort a girl when she was suffering in front of them. Society would be far better that way. That wasn't actually how things worked, though, so I didn't know how to help her. I could only bite my lip and stand there pathetically.

An awkward silence hung between us for a while. Finally, Nito shook her head as if to clear it and forced her face up, pasting on the biggest smile she could manage.

"Sorry about that. I'm taking advantage of you again. Just forget about it."

It didn't feel right to accept her apology. I wanted to apologize myself, in fact, for having nothing better to tell her.

"I don't think you're taking advantage at all," I answered eventually.

"Even though I know there's no easy solution or answer to this, I'm still bothering you with it," she replied firmly.

Nito looked down the corridor. The setting sun shining in from outside created floating islands of light in front of each window, glowing at even intervals down its length. The curtains on the few slightly open windows were swaying in the breeze. For a long moment, Nito just stood and took it in.

"This weather is a gorgeous sight..." she said eventually.

"That's an interesting way of putting it. Couldn't you just say it's good weather?"

"The weather being clear and comfortable doesn't necessarily mean it's good, I don't think."

I voiced my agreement. The weather didn't care about our feelings. No matter how depressed you got, the sky could stay disgustingly blue and bright. Those clear days themselves sometimes felt depressing, especially at times like this.

"Can I do some painting?" she asked. "That is, if you've got no plans for us."

"Of course you can," I answered.

Painting was a big part of Nito's life, and I knew it was also a way she could get her feelings and thoughts in order. Even I needed time to calm myself and think things through.

She went back to our room, then left the temple with her bag of materials on her back and her easel propped over her shoulder, probably headed off to find something to paint. I went back to the room as well, but I didn't set about to do anything in particular like she had. I fished my phone out of my bag and sat down in the chair. I could have passed hours like that if I'd had an internet connection, but all I had now was my little metal box, without all the bells and whistles. I could play whatever music I had downloaded, take notes, and look back on the few photos I had, but not much else.

I picked a song at random, the familiar Japanese pop music clashing with the surreal scenery of another world. Just as I started to think about maybe copying Charolles and inspecting the Kettle, there was a knock at the door. It was ajar, so that seemed strange. When I turned to look, I saw Jill standing in the doorway.

3

We moved to the main hall to talk, because I was sure Jill would never be able to relax in a closed-off room. Even with three seats' worth of space between us, though, the conversation was slow to start.

"Um, what happened?" I asked.

It was pretty blatant that she needed to talk to me about something, but I had no idea what it might be. The most I knew was that, with her personality, it would have taken an immense amount of courage to come find me on her own.

Jill made to speak but couldn't get out what she wanted to say, and her face twisted in conflict. Every time she met my gaze, she bit at her lips. Clearly, she couldn't just dive right in with the main reason she was here, so I figured that maybe it would be better to calm us both down with some meaningless small talk.

"Did you come here by car?" I asked.

"I did," she answered hesitantly.

"The one Paula drives?"

"It's, um, one that I found before I came here, so...we share it."

"Were you brought up here too, then?"

She shook her head.

"I-I'm...from Barcia...and that's where I met Paula."

"So you're old friends, then?"

"We haven't been friends for that lo—" she began, before cutting herself off. "I'm...sorry. It must be infuriating... I can't really talk with people, but I just don't..."

"I've actually been to Barcia," I interrupted, changing the topic.

I laughed at the shocked look and gasp that my comment garnered.

"It was a beautiful town, with pretty impressive buildings."

"Yeah...it was. There were so many people in it back then."

"Was it an easy place to live?"

"It was," she answered with a small smile. "No one would pay attention to someone like me there..."

"So how did you get to know Paula?" I asked, then quickly added, "Oh, I'm only asking out of curiosity. It might sound a bit rude, but you don't seem all that similar."

"Right. We're not...at all."

Jill chuckled slightly, and then a sigh left her lips and seemed to take the tension from her shoulders with it. As she began to speak, her eyes flicked upward like she was reliving a treasured memory.

"Do you know that Paula used to work in a tailor shop?"

I nodded.

"Well, I had a dress made by that shop. My gran was holding some kind of event and I had to participate... Anyway, it was Paula that made my dress for

it.”

“I don’t know whether I should ask, but, back then, did she, um...”

“She dressed as a man and had short hair combed right into place. She spoke like a stereotypical man as well...”

Jill grew more amused the more she spoke. This unburdened expression was probably what she was really like under the shyness.

“I could never deal well with men... I could barely be near them, let alone talk to them. It was bizarre, though—none of the usual panic happened with Paula, and she was fun to speak with... Thinking back on it now, I wonder if it was because she was a woman at heart,” she mused, pausing briefly.

“It’s somewhat embarrassing to admit, but...” she warned as she continued, “I thought it was love... I wanted to see her more than anything, so I had her make me five outfits in two months. I was never even planning on wearing them.”

With this sudden revelation from the adult in the room, it was *me* that ended up feeling embarrassed.

“Then, um, are...the two of you together?”

Jill gasped and waved her hands in front of her face in denial.

“No, no, we’re not. Um, Paula noticed how I felt and told me about herself and then apologized for leading me on... That wasn’t what had happened at all, though, I’d just gotten ahead of myself... Either way, that’s how my first love ended, but we became really good friends.”

Jill then seemed to fall into a reverie, but just before I’d actually decided she had, she lifted her chin and fixed me with a serious look.

“I heard from Paula that she told you and Nito about things...between her and her mother.”

“She did,” I said after a moment.

“I’ve got a request. Help me get them back on good terms...”

I’d thought she might say that. She was closer to Paula than anyone else, so I’d figured she had to know what was going on and be concerned about it. It

must have been weighing on her mind far more frequently and more seriously than it did on mine. Now that she'd gotten it out, it was as if a dam had finally broken, and the words gushed from her mouth.

"She, um, really loves her mother. That's why she stays here even though it hurts her. She won't go and actually speak to her, though. With the way I am, I can't ever force any issue and so I gave up on it...but I'm sure she wants to make up with her."

Her shoulders were heaving with ragged breaths, and her cheeks had gone ruddy. She seemed embarrassed at her own uncharacteristic actions but still didn't stop.

"She comes out here every morning," she said quietly. "She comes all the way here just to hide and watch her mother clean the temple. She laughs about how well her mother looks once she gets back, and all I can do is nod... I don't know how else to deal with it..."

Then she lowered her head toward me, leaning down so deeply it was like she was trying to touch her forehead to the seat of the chair.

"I know how strange a request this is, but I can't do anything about it alone... Please, would you help me think of a plan and see it through?!"

"Jill, calm down, sit up!" I yelped, panicked.

I couldn't keep calm when someone older than me was bowing so deeply at me. That being said, I couldn't haul her up by the shoulders either, so I just dithered, my hands twitching reflexively. All I could do was answer her feeble plea with a "yes." Timidly, she lifted her face and peered at me.

"You will?"

Still, her gaze looked far less panicked than I'd have thought, and I started to consider that she might even have acted so drastically as a ruse.

"That's not fair..." I told her.

"Well...I *am* still older than you."

Her expression was both apologetic and amused, like a young girl caught in the middle of a prank. I was sure that it was the kind of expression that men

would never be able to stand up against from a woman. Regardless, Nito and I were in the same position as her.

“We don’t have any good ideas either, though.”

“Figures. There’s nothing from your world that’d let you just snap your fingers and fix it, huh...”

“I’d love a pocket full of gadgets from the future,” I answered before noticing that she’d just dropped the fact that I wasn’t from this world as if it was nothing. “Did Paula tell you? That I’m from another world, I mean.”

That seemed to me like a pretty obvious explanation, but Jill shook her head.

“I, um, I knew as soon...as soon as I met you.”

“Is it that easy to tell? Is it how I act, how I look?”

Again, though, Jill shook her head.

“Um...can you keep a secret?”

I couldn’t help but nod, waiting with bated breath at her secretive tone. I was sure there was no man in this world that’d refuse a secret from a woman when she asked like that. Jill leaned ever so slightly forward and put a hand next to her mouth. I leaned in as well, catching a whiff of a fresh floral scent.

“I’m a witch.”

4

Nito and I had met someone else that went by that title. It hadn’t even been that long ago. Witches had magic and could answer any question you asked them correctly, but only once. We’d stopped in Barcia specifically to take advantage of that power.

“You can give a correct answer to anything?”

I couldn’t stop the tinge of doubt that crept into my voice. After all, the witch we’d found in Barcia was actually a fake that used her sharp observation and conversational skills to falsify miracles. A laugh burst forth from Jill, and she quickly covered her mouth to stifle it.

“Your world has witches?” she asked.

“Nope, I’ve just had dealings with them before.”

“So that’s why you know that old fairy tale,” she realized, shaking her head. “That’s not what witches do, though I’ve often wished it were...”

Nothing in her tone implied deceit. It just felt matter of fact, like she was talking about obvious, everyday things. Besides, she had no reason to lie to me about this.

“So you’re a real witch, then? With magic and stuff?”

I half rose from my seat in excitement as I said it, but Jill just grew even more flustered.

“I-I can’t use it, I’m sorry. That’s what mages do!”

“What’s a witch do, then?”

“Witches are like civilian doctors that use pharmacology and supernatural methods... We do things like stewing herbs to create medicines, making people feel better, easing pain, and so on... Ceremonially, we also expel evil.”

“That’s way too down to earth.”

If anything, such a role seemed like it would have been more at home in my own world.

“The thing is...witchhood is heritable.”

“Heritable?”

“The common assumption is that magic is carried in the blood. The lineage weakened as magic declined...but there were still families that passed it on, and those descendants are still called witches.”

“Wouldn’t that mean you could use magic?”

“Well...it’s more like I *have* magic than I’m able to *use* it. They say that medicines made by a witch, as well as their prayers, have mana within them, so they can at least somewhat influence a person.”

“So you make those magic medicines?”

“I, um, don’t have the skill,” she explained, so I guessed that it wasn’t something you could do just because of your lineage. “I end up putting mana in my singing. However much I practice, I can’t control it...”

When I heard the phrase “mana in my singing,” I had a vivid recollection of when we’d eavesdropped on Jill in the theater.

“When I heard you singing, I felt chills up my back and my head went all woolly, and then I felt really refreshed. Was that...?”

“Yes, it was,” she admitted hesitantly.

“For real?! That’s totally magic!”

I’d slipped into really casual speech there. As soon as I noticed it, I quickly covered my mouth. Jill lowered her head again.

“I’m sorry for not asking if it was okay...”

“Forget all that. I want to thank you for how amazing it was... Why don’t you sing in front of people? I’m sure you’d be a wonderful singer.”

Nito and I had both been agape and charmed by her singing, and I knew anyone else would feel the same. Still, Jill just hunched over further.

“My family all forbade it...”

“They forbade it? Why?”

“I’d always thought that would be better too. I love singing. But...if I sang while I was sad, then anyone that listened would get sad. If I sang while suffering, so would they. That’s a witch’s power... And, because I use song as a medium, it doesn’t matter how much mana someone has, it affects everyone the same.”

I saw what she was getting at. If it were just that she had a wonderful singing voice then it’d be fine, but her voice had mana within it, which could control people’s feelings.

“Does it end up being like brainwashing?” I asked. “Like, if they were sad, would just listening to your music make them feel overjoyed?”

“I can’t make people feel things they don’t want to. Magic that can control

emotions takes exceedingly great power...”

“Then I think that’s even better... When someone wants to enjoy themselves, you can give them a smile, and when they’re sad, you can cry with them and sympathize. I’ve always thought that music’s influence on the heart is one of its best features.”

Jill looked back at me and softly shook her head.

“That isn’t the only problem... Witches live in secret. Things always get much more difficult if we’re found by people with influence, and there’s also prejudice against magic these days...so people that knew about it would be able to tell what I was doing, and they’d out me.”

To that, at least, I had no answer. Jill gaining acclaim for her voice would have made things more difficult for her. Despite being able to move hearts like no other, she could never sing proudly in front of people, all to protect her family. I could only sigh in sympathy at the unfulfilling circumstance it must have been.

“Did you never dream of it?” I asked.

“Dream?”

I searched for words. If I was too blunt, it would hurt her. The passing of time had a way of distorting and darkening memories, but still, I had to know how she felt.

“Of singing for people...a song from you, just for them.”

Jill’s eyes fell as I spoke, and even after I’d finished, she didn’t reply for a while. Just as I was beginning to regret asking, she spoke up.

“I always dreamed of it,” she answered. “I always sang—in the living room, in our little bathroom, and under my covers. My only audience was my family. I loved singing, and I didn’t have any other skills. I couldn’t sing for other people either, though...but I’d think of it every time I passed the theater. I’d dream of standing under its lights and singing out like the songstresses of old, of cheering up and energizing the audience, and of being able to love myself.”

“But it doesn’t matter,” she concluded with a small smile. “The world is dead... My dream can remain a dream, and that’s for the best.”

I couldn't hold her gaze this time. I couldn't pretend to understand her feelings about the world she'd spent her whole life in suddenly falling to ruin. I hadn't suffered as she had, and so I couldn't comment.

The silence didn't last long, though.

"I'm sorry. I just ended up taking over the conversation and going on and on. I'll never sing for a huge audience; I don't think I could. But, if my singing has some power, some meaning to it...then I want to sing for Paula."

Even as I shook my head at her initial self-derision, she raised her hands to her lips, her fingers laced together, as if she were praying fervently.

"I've always thought...that maybe I can erase those reservations, that pain, that sadness with my song..."

Was that possible? Jill's singing could give people's emotions a push. Maybe it could be a push of courage to take that one more step—a song of hope. The issue was that it couldn't make someone feel something they didn't want to feel. So if Fago didn't want to reconcile, it would be for naught.

"That's all I can do...but I don't know how to do it best, or what emotions to sing with...so would you think about it with me?"

The equation she'd given me was one designed for the problem I'd had no solution to. The only problem now was that I had no idea how to actually apply said equation.

"It feels like this is something out of a story, songs being so tied to emotions like that."

It just didn't feel realistic, so much so that it made me want to laugh.

"Personally, I think you're much more 'out of a story,'" Jill said out of nowhere, getting an utterly shocked look from me. "There were so many stories about otherworlders in the past. They all had some influence on the world. Not just in culture or technology...but on people's feelings, thoughts, and actions. I thought that with your values from another world, you might have some ideas...and I got my hopes up. Um, I'm sorry."

I could only give a half smile. I was no great figure from the past. Even if the

rest of the otherworlders had been amazing, I was just a normal person, not some hero or savior. She was relying on me, though, so I couldn't just say it was impossible. It was almost like some small measure of pride was pushing me to give it a shot. I felt competitive, like I couldn't give up and do nothing. It wasn't for Jill or Paula, it was just...

I couldn't help but laugh and shake my head at my own train of thought.

"Got it. I'll think of something—something great," I told her.

"Thank you!"

Jill bowed deeply once again, sending me into another panic. Once she was finally upright again and back to normal, I asked her about the last thing that was bothering me.

"How did you know I was an otherworlder?" I asked.

Her expression looked so mature in that moment, and I couldn't parse any meaning from it.

"Witches can see other people's mana, like a vague light emanating from them. Everyone from this world has mana."

Oh, I get it, I thought, predicting her next statement.

"Otherworlders don't have mana."

5

I knocked and, after a few moments, the door opened a crack. Fago's face appeared in the gap and she surveyed me briefly, before letting out a slight sigh. With an exaggerated frown, she finally spoke.

"Rare to see you here on your own."

"Would you have preferred someone else?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "Anyway, did you need something?"

"I thought we could discuss the Lantern Flower Festival."

“So you’re really going ahead with it... Fine then, come in.”

I took her up on her offer and walked inside. A small wooden frame rested on the living room table with white cloth stretched tight across it. A needle stood stabbed partway through the cloth, red thread trailing from its end.

“Embroidery?” I asked.

“You need something to amuse yourself when you have this much free time,” was her only answer.

I paused for a moment, then replied, “I completely get that.”

After all, I’m always worrying about what to do with myself.

“I’ll brew some tea. You sit and wait.”

She quickly tidied up the cloth and sewing implements that were scattered across the table and sofa before heading into the kitchen. I watched her leave, then turned my gaze to the black-and-white photos on the shelf. A certain one of them was, unsurprisingly, still sitting facedown.

“What do we need for the festival, then?” I asked, raising my voice so she could hear me from the kitchen.

“Well, firstly, you need food. Also, some alcohol.”

“Nito and I can’t drink.”

“It’s for making an offering to the saint. You two are far too young for drinking and making merry.”

Right, that makes sense. This was closer to a religious festival than a standard summer festival from back home, so preparing things to share with the saint would be critical.

“Also, there’s always a bonfire when night falls, so we’ll need firewood. There’s a stockpile in the temple that we can use, though. The final thing is the lantern flowers themselves.”

“Where do they grow?”

“You’ve been to that stubborn old man’s house, right? They grow around that lake he lives by.”

“We’ll need to collect them, then. Lots of them.”

“There’s only going to be four of us, right? No need to get that many. We’re better off having too few than getting tired of releasing them all.”

“True. I invited the others, but they turned me down. Every last one—Monty, Jill...and Paula.”

“Well...you’re holding a festival that no one’s held in ages. It’s only natural people wouldn’t want to participate after this long.”

Fago returned from the kitchen, carrying a tea set atop a tray. Then she just stood there for a moment and aimed a doubtful look at me. I was pretty sure I had a concerned expression on my face as I looked back at her. Poking my nose into other people’s business was really not something I enjoyed, but I made myself ask anyway.

“Do you, uh, know the name ‘Paula’?”

“Who’s to say? You quickly forget names as the years pile on,” she answered indifferently, putting the tray on the table and starting to pour out the tea.

“You seem to have known Monty for a long time.”

“He used to live here before he moved farther out, and the village was small enough that everyone knew everyone else.”

“So you knew his daughter too?”

It was only then that she stopped pouring. She didn’t look at me, just let out a sigh of what I could only identify as defeat.

“So you already knew... Out with it, then. Enough with all this beating around the bush.”

“Sorry. I only just found out, to be honest.”

I relaxed ever so slightly when she paused to blow the steam off her tea. This was a sensitive enough issue that I wouldn’t have been surprised to find myself getting kicked out. If she was acting this calm, though, I reasoned that I probably wouldn’t need to flee, so I sat myself down on the sofa.

After pondering whether to move along with the conversation or the tea, I

eventually decided to wet my throat first. As I took a sip of the hot tea, I considered how to go about this. I'd been thinking about it even before I arrived, but I still had no good ideas. It seemed like the only choice was to dispense with the indirectness and just be upfront about it.

"You've noticed Paula coming over here from Mercian Street, haven't you?"

"Of course," Fago answered, with the same attitude, expression, and tone as ever. "Staring at me from the shadows every morning with such long hair and in that gaudy dress—it'd be harder for me not to notice."

"Well...right. That makes sense now that you say it."

It'd felt like I was making a shocking revelation, but given what she'd said, it *was* pretty obvious she'd have noticed. Paula was tall and well built to begin with, and her bright clothes would have just made her all the more visible from a distance.

"That child's always overlooked things like that. Guess there's no changing someone's nature, then. They really think I haven't noticed?"

"Ah... Yes."

I'd gotten myself pretty fired up and ready for a serious discussion, but I ended up feeling adrift after Fago's calm response. Still, I couldn't just have the tea and then leave again.

"If you know, then haven't you considered talking to her?"

"I have not." *This* time, her voice was sharp. "How can I show my face now? What should I even say? My son died the day he left this house. I'm sure my child is well aware of that."

She'd completely refused the idea. Given the way she was talking *about* Paula, talking *to* her must have been a daunting prospect.

"But you're parent and child, right?" I pressed. "She's right there."

"Then it doesn't have to be me. If this amount of distance between us works for them, then it's best for the both of us. Still, to try and go through a child like you... That's just disgraceful."

"Paula didn't ask me to do this," I admitted.

“Oh, so you’re interfering in someone else’s family matters out of pure curiosity?”

I could tell the situation had taken a bad turn. Anyone would have known as much; it wasn’t a logical deduction, but more of an instinctual feeling that I had at that moment.

“That’s an unwise thing to do, don’t you think?”

“Right... I’m sorry,” I replied.

How many years had it been since I’d been scolded like this? I wasn’t being yelled at, but sternly scolded, and that made me feel all the more pathetic. Fago was right. The blame was all on me here.

“Honestly, I understand that you have time on your hands, but you should use it for something actually worthwhile.”

Even the gentle chiding she continued with just made me feel worse.

“You’re quite right...but I think that being here for this *is* worthwhile.”

Fago fixed me with a glare, and I got ready for another scolding. Then, abruptly, she relaxed, letting out a sigh through her nose.

“I doubt it will be... It’s not a fun story; nothing we old fools have to say ever is. Talking about it won’t change anything, either, so there’s little point in bringing up the past.”

Those words were proof that she’d accepted my prying, in her own way.

“Can I ask what happened?”

There was a long pause.

“Parents inevitably have expectations of and hopes for their children. When they’re just babbling babes, you simply hope they’ll be happy. Then, when they start being able to speak and reason, that’s when the expectations start. You want for them to grow into upstanding members of society, for them to succeed, and to be able to see yourself in them.”

“That doesn’t sound like a bad thing to me.”

“It’s not. But when you pressure your child to meet those expectations, it’s

not good either.”

Her eyes were turned to the surface of her tea, but I had little doubt that she wasn't seeing the present at all.

“My husband and I did the best we could over the years. Even now, I can't think of what exactly we did wrong. Maybe we were just wrong from the start,” she continued, a tired sigh of remembrance passing her lips. “Maybe it would have been better if we weren't the parents, if there'd been better ones that weren't as stuck in their ways and wouldn't need decades to change their thinking.”

Fago's eyes shot up and her gaze slid across the table to the embroidery frame resting at its edge.

“Unraveling a tangled thread is difficult. Usually you'd just cut it and throw the tangle away. You can't do that with the threads that bind family, though. Try as you might to undo the tangle, you just make it worse and worse, until eventually it's unsalvageable.”

I hesitated, before asking, “Did something cause the tangle?”

She laughed, probably because of how timidly—almost fearfully—I'd asked.

“It was simple. One day, our child told us, ‘I'm a woman and I want to become a dancer,’ and my husband answered with his fists. I couldn't protect my child. I couldn't accept what they'd said. Then they left, and that was that. That...was really that.”

I could barely guess at all the emotions contained in those last words. Simply because they couldn't get past that one barrier, Paula and Fago were both suffering. Fago's voice trembled as she continued.

“How can I call myself a mother when I couldn't even accept and embrace my child? I can't face them. However much I apologized, it wouldn't be enough. When I think of how they've spent their life since then, I...”

Eventually she couldn't go on any further. She pressed her lips tightly together, keeping her expression composed despite her distress. She wouldn't allow herself to show grief or sadness, as if she felt she didn't have the right to them.

“Would you be willing to meet with Paula if she said she wanted to?”

As I asked, I knew that it might not be something I should offer her. Even so, I felt like I had to. I wanted the thread between them untangled.

“I’d ask for forgiveness if we did meet again. I’m not a strong person.”

“Is that bad? If you apologize and she forgives you, what’s wrong with that?”

“I can’t forgive myself.”

People pray for forgiveness. I felt like I finally understood what Monty had meant.

They didn’t pray for forgiveness from someone else, but from themselves. It was a prayer doomed to never be granted. Someone that could forgive themselves that easily wouldn’t pray for it in the first place. Fago went to the temple every morning to pray, and as she did so, she was blaming herself. Even as the world fell apart, Fago continued her routine. Her child was right there, and yet she wouldn’t allow herself to see her.

I pressed my fist against my temple and ground it around. The dull pain cleared my head. Even so, I couldn’t find the magic words to persuade her. Of course, it was no surprise; hadn’t magic fallen to ruin as well?

The words must have existed once, somewhere. The nobles, the saint—one of them would have known some miraculous spell that could resolve all the pain and worries people had, and bridge the inevitable gaps that opened between them. After all, worlds like this one were almost fairy tales. Why couldn’t everything be solved neatly, then, just like in those fairy tales?

[Keisuke's Notes] The Crimson Saint

I hear about this woman here and there. She was apparently a pretty big deal in the past? There's even a religion founded around her, and a magnificent statue of her in the temple here, which tells you how amazing she must have been. Her statue's beautiful, though it does feel like it's glorifying her appearance.

Chapter 5 — Alone Together in the Midnight Blue

1

“I’ve been thinking,” Nito said as we finished dinner.

There was no need to ask what about—it had to be the Lantern Flower Festival. She took out her sketchbook, opened it to a specific page, and then passed it to me. Charolles leaned in, shifting just a little closer to my side, and joined me in looking at the page.

“Wonderful...” she murmured, prompting me to give a nod of agreement.

Nito’s art skills were scarily good. If I’d been a little more refined, maybe I’d have been able to say *what* precisely made the art I was looking at wonderful, but, as it was, all that came to mind were tired cliches like it being immersive or pretty, or that the colors seemed to swallow me in. In some ways, those worn-out platitudes filling my head might have shown just how close to my heart it had struck.

I kept staring at the little painting on the sketchbook page, beautiful in the lantern light. It showed the village as seen from the bottom of the hill. The houses all stood shoulder to shoulder as they climbed the page, and the very tip of the temple was poking up over the few trees that surrounded it. The clouds were softened by the evening light, and the whole image inspired a sense of nostalgic homesickness.

“U-Um... It’s embarrassing seeing you look at it so closely,” Nito fretted, fingers twisting together. “Turn the page, please.”

The next paintings depicted the temple, the theater on Mercian Street, and Fago’s house.

“Um, I thought we could write on the backs of these and make them into invitations.”

For the festival?

“That’s...an interesting idea,” I said.

“But, uh,” she carried on, looking unsure and twirling her hair around a finger, “it’s just an idea...not anything concrete. I was wondering what I could do to help. I don’t know how these things work, and I can’t infer people’s feelings like you can...so all I could think of was painting.”

She lifted her head to peek at my reaction.

“So...these will be, um, a real invitation! With all my feelings behind it!” she exclaimed, clenching her fist.

I could only stare back at her, dumbfounded. Her best idea for swaying people that had already refused once, due to either personal circumstances or a lack of interest...was an invitation with all her feelings behind it?

“That’s... Nito, you...”

Charolles took over from me as I struggled to string a sentence together.

“You have a very straightforward way of thinking.”

“Yeah, straightforward,” I echoed. “Seriously, right down the middle.”

Nito paused, her ears drooping.

“So it won’t work?” she asked.

At the same moment, I felt an elbow dig into my side. I jolted, a sound the likes of which I’d never heard before escaping my mouth. While trying to overcome the pain she’d inflicted, I glared at Charolles, but she didn’t even look in my direction. Sure, I might have been in the wrong there, but still, she was merciless; plus, she didn’t have to look so nonchalant about it.

“That’s not it. It’s just such a straightforward idea that I hadn’t thought of it. I was surprised, is all,” I answered, rubbing my side. “Normally I’d give up on simply asking if someone refused the first time, and I’d try to think of some other way to persuade them. I just tell myself that it’s a problem that needs to be solved and then get all guarded.”

Now, I couldn’t puff out my chest and call that an adult way of thinking. It wasn’t even that someone had told me that there was a “right” answer and that I had to do things that way. I always got caught up in my thoughts, was all—

telling myself I had to do things right, go about things logically, when really what I needed to do was just go for it.

“So...I think your idea might be just what we need.”

I suspected that this occasional clash in philosophies might have been just what the two of us needed. Still, Nito’s expression was uneasy.

“But Paula seemed like she really didn’t want to come...”

“I’m sure it’ll work out. If you bring her such a wonderful invitation, she’ll have no choice but to accept. You can take advantage of her kindness.”

“Just so you know,” Charolles interjected, “what you’re saying is awful.”

“Well, could you refuse an invitation like that from Nito?” I asked.

“I’d like to see someone who could,” she admitted.

Nito’s power of persuasion had to be off the charts if even Charolles had that much confidence about it. I realized that having Nito make a straightforward request might actually be the best idea.

“Right, let’s do it!” I exclaimed.

After an uncertain pause, Nito asked, “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. It’ll definitely work,” I told her, and her expression finally relaxed.

The three of us put our heads together over Nito’s sketchbook, almost like generals leaning over a map at a war meeting.

“By the way, I don’t know how you make these sorts of invitations,” I admitted.

“You put the recipient and a short greeting, then give the time and place of the event, and that’s all. We need to decide what to put for those first,” Nito told me.

“We can leave the first two for now. Let’s start with when and where to have the festival,” Charolles commented.

“We can hold it here, can’t we? After all, it’s for the saint,” I suggested. “I asked Fago and she said all we need is food, firewood, and lantern flowers. There should be enough firewood in the temple’s store.”

“There aren’t many of us, so it will be difficult to get everything ready quickly,” Nito said slowly, mulling things over.

Charolles gave a bright laugh.

“Did you forget about my bag? I have plenty of fresh food, and I can carry as much firewood and as many lantern flowers as you’d like.”

After letting the moment sink in for a bit, I spoke up.

“That’s our Charoemon, reliable as ever.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Not at all!”

Our discussion about the festival carried on like that for a while. We talked about using the food stored on Mercian Street that Paula had mentioned, about how the lantern flowers grew by the lake so we’d have to go pick them, about how to make the campfire, and more besides. We had a fairly good time planning things; after all, we were excited. Up till now, all we’d had in our lives was a sense of inevitable loss, of everything ending. It was like scooping up sand and watching it trickle out between your fingers, disappearing little by little. Planning an event like this, laughing together as we discussed our ideas with others, added more sand to our cupped palms.

We talked and talked, deciding on many things, until the final decision left was when to do it. No one had real plans in this world anymore, since anything you might prioritize had already gone.

“I think we should go with tomorrow,” Nito said firmly.

“Why tomorrow?” I asked curiously, and she smiled shyly at me as she replied.

“Well, if we put it off, the loneliness will start to feel stronger than the eagerness. That’s why I think we should do it tomorrow, so we can have the festival while we’re still eager for it.”

I voiced my agreement. Eagerness and loneliness were like two sides of a coin, but in this world, loneliness was just that little bit stronger. If Nito wanted to do the festival tomorrow, we had no reason to object.

“Tomorrow, then,” I concluded.

“This might sound a bit odd coming from me, considering I suggested it in the first place, but...you don’t think that’s a bit too soon...?”

“That’s okay. Everyone could do with some enjoyment,” Charolles commented, earning a smiling nod from Nito.

“All right, tomorrow it is!”

2

Nito had fallen right asleep once we finished, and I carried her to bed on my back. Charolles helped me lay her down, then took her shoes off, and I covered her with the quilt. We made sure she was still sleeping soundly and then left.

“She’s out cold.”

“Well, she put so much effort into those invitations, it *would* tire her out, right?”

I’d been surprised to learn that she’d walked all the way out to the theater to paint the pictures. Considering that, it was hardly a surprise that she’d gotten back late. As we’d finished adding the addressees and start time to the invitations, she’d been nodding off a bit, and just as I’d noticed that, she’d finally fallen asleep, her head dropping down onto the table.

Charolles and I went back to the library and looked at Nito’s invitations, spread out on the table. There were only a few, but they were all done just right.

“She’s a good kid,” Charolles said after a moment.

“She really is. Shockingly so.”

I didn’t know anyone else that could sympathize so well with other people, worry about them so earnestly, and rejoice or mourn with them the way she could.

“Make sure you keep her safe.”

“Of course I will.”

“Otherwise, I’ll take her with me,” she returned with a chuckle.

“I could do without the bold declarations of kidnapping,” I said with a chuckle of my own. I didn’t even see my next words coming; they just fell out of my mouth. “Why don’t you come with us?”

Charolles looked blankly at me.

“I mean, Nito’d be over the moon,” I rushed to add, “and you don’t exactly have any particular destination.”

Even to me, the reasons I gave sounded like excuses.

“Well, traveling with you might be fun in its own way,” she replied, but there was no way I could miss the implicit meaning in her words; this wasn’t an agreement, it was an indirect refusal. “I’ve always been jealous of relationships like yours.”

She smiled gently, propping her chin on a hand and letting her gaze fall back to the table. Running a finger along the edge of one of the paintings, she continued.

“I’m a touch tired, though, so I’ll go it alone.”

We were both quiet for a moment, her words hanging between us.

“Is it because you couldn’t find the end of your story?” I asked eventually.

“Well, that’s part of it, but not the entirety,” Charolles began, then seemed to remember herself and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Forget about it. Sorry.”

I wanted to know what she’d been about to say. I wanted to know the things she worried about. Excessive meddling though it might have been, I wanted even the barest contact with the feelings she held inside her. She’d marshaled her self-control and stopped herself, though. She didn’t continue any further, just went back to her usual placid expression.

“We should get some sleep as well. We’ll have to be up early preparing for the festival.”

As I was searching for some way to hold her back, one particular scene came to mind.

“Want to go space out before we turn in?” I asked.

Charolles had stood, but now she cocked her head at me.

“Do you always come out of nowhere with these things?”

“Is that praise?”

“You’d be better off using different phrasing if you’re going to proposition someone.”

“You say that, but aren’t you interested?”

“I am. I’ve got a bit of a weakness for silly things like that.”

“Let’s go, then.”

I stood and led the way out of the room. We passed through the corridor, then out of the temple hall, finally stepping outside where there was no illumination but the moon.

“Right, get your trike out of that 4D Bag of yours.”

“Where are we going, anyway?”

“The best place to space out is atop a lake, haven’t you heard?”

“No...I haven’t,” she said, letting out an exasperated sigh.

She took out her trike and immediately mounted it. Time was stopped inside her magic bag, so just as I’d predicted, the trike was already warmed up and ready to go. While “trike” might sound like “bike,” the tires and chassis were closer in size to a car’s. Bare pipes entwined the body of it, and I wasn’t quite sure how to get on. Moving carefully, I managed to get myself into the seat, but that brought me very close to Charolles all of a sudden, which left me instantly nervous.

“Um, what do I do here?” I asked.

Obviously, not having anywhere to grab as a handhold would have made me nervous, but it was worse than that. The only thing in sight that I *could* grab hold of was the girl sitting in front of me.

“There’s a handle behind the seat,” she told me. “Grab hold of that.”

I fumbled around for it.

“Ah, this?”

“I don’t mind if you’d rather hold on to my waist, though.”

“Yeah, no, I’m good with the handle.”

My reply might have ended up sounding kind of blunt, but I couldn’t really do anything about that. I was a healthy teenager, after all; holding on to her waist was too risky. So, yeah, I couldn’t do anything about her chuckling at me either. *Damn it.*

“Off we go, then.”

She started off slow, but even then, the instability of my seat made me nervous. It felt like I might fall off at any moment and hurt myself. I couldn’t relax as much as I could in a car. As we left the courtyard and got onto the road, I swallowed a yelp. I’d never paid it any mind when driving in the Kettle, but now every bump in the road’s surface made me bounce in the seat. Each time I felt that alarming weightlessness, I gripped tighter around the handle.

“You okay?” Charolles asked, louder than usual.

She’d raised her voice to make sure I heard her over the deafening noise of the trike. The pistons in the engine underneath us, coupled with the tires biting into the road below us and the wind whipping past our ears, swallowed up every other sound but still didn’t manage to drown her out.

“This is nothing!” I yelled back.

It was a bluff, of course. I’ve yet to meet any guy that doesn’t bluff that way—doesn’t say he’s fine even if he’s in pain, or that he’s not afraid even if he is. My “it’s nothing” was much the same.

“I don’t need to hold back, then.”

“Eek!”

The trike sped up, making me feel like I was being pulled backward. The high-pitched noise I made was just some escaping air that’d been caught in my throat. It wasn’t a scream at all. Definitely not.

Luckily, the acceleration only lasted for a moment, and then she immediately returned to a smoother speed. I let out the breath I'd been holding and sucked in a fresh lungful of air. I could feel my heart racing as well, as Charolles's irrepressible laughter made its way to my ears.

"I see now that you're a bully," I told her.

"Oh, wasn't this 'nothing'?"

"Of course it is."

"Want to give it another go, then?"

"No, thank you. This is fine, if you wouldn't mind."

Her laughter fluttered back to me on the wind again. I pouted slightly, wishing I could come up with a retort or make some kind of counterattack, but it would hardly have mattered even if I had. The conclusion was obvious: there was nothing I could do while she still had the handlebars. I could only wait it out, my heart frozen with fear at the death-defying journey we were on...

Despite that little joke I told myself about it being scary, though, her driving through the trees and shrubbery with no actual lighting to speak of turned out to be completely safe. It was quicker than the car as well, and we soon arrived in front of Monty's house. His lights were on, as it happened. Considering he'd mentioned nights being boring, I figured he'd definitely be up even at this hour. His boat was at the jetty below, so he'd be inside as well.

I knocked on the door and Monty opened it, a glass of something in his hand. He looked at me, then at Charolles standing slightly behind me.

"Eloping, are you?"

"Are you drunk?" I returned.

"A little. What brings you two here at this time of night?"

He turned to invite us in, but I shook my head.

"I was actually hoping to borrow your boat."

Monty just replied, "Do what you like," before heading back inside. The process had gone more quickly than I'd expected, so I was honestly a bit taken

aback. Either way, though, we now had permission, so we headed down to the lake.

The moonlight shone down on the wide-open lake and reflected off its surface, making at least the area directly around it bright enough to see. The boat was smaller than I'd expected when I saw it from the pier, and I estimated that the two of us would be about the limit of its capacity. We stood there for a moment, just looking at it.

"It's the first time I've ever been on a boat," Charolles said eventually.

"That's all right. First time for me too."

"Thank you for your not-at-all-assuring reassurance."

I pulled in the boat by its rope and then held it still. Unusually unsure of herself, Charolles boarded with extreme care. The boat shifted as she transferred her weight to it, but she kept her balance without panicking or flailing. She had insane reflexes, it seemed. Once she was settled, I untied the rope and got ready for my turn. Charolles gripped the jetty with her hand to steady the boat as I carefully made my own way on. The boat was shifting and bobbing, and I immediately sat myself down.

"Let's go, then," I said.

"I can't calm down being on the water like this," she complained, and yet her expression was still set in its usual placidity.

An oar rested on each side of the boat, and I knew I could use them to get us moving. I splashed just the one through the water, getting us away from the jetty. Charolles and I were facing each other, and we were moving backward from my perspective, so I could see the shore gradually growing farther away behind her.

Rowing was harder than I'd thought it would be. The oars themselves were heavy, and they grew even more so as I dragged them through the water. Even putting my full weight behind each stroke, I couldn't get us going as fast as I'd expected to.

"Incredible..."

Still, considering how much Charolles seemed to enjoy looking out at the lake as we went, I couldn't complain. It was times like these when a man *should* be stubborn, after all. I got better at rowing the more I repeated the motions of it, and eventually the boat arrived at pretty much the center of the lake.

Its surface sparkled in the moonlight as we floated atop it. Boats were strange vessels. We were floating on the water, and yet it felt nothing like swimming. The sensation was completely different. I looked over to see Charolles sitting with her knees pressed together, her feet tucked off to one side as she leaned outward. She put her left hand on the edge of the boat for balance and looked out at the distant shore, the corner of her mouth lifting into a slight smile.

"How do you like your first boat trip?" I asked.

"Well...it's not bad. I almost want one myself."

"That somehow doesn't sound like a joke, coming from you."

After all, she had her magic bag. She could easily have carried one around with her.

We didn't speak any more than that, just sat quietly spacing out. The night darkened the landscape, so the only shapes I could really make out in the moonlight were the mountains and the trees. The slight lapping of the water against the hull of the boat was the only sound. It felt like we were perched atop a sleeping world.

"Do you have any dreams that you've never been able to get out of your head?" Charolles asked suddenly.

I thought back vacantly.

"I do."

"Like what?"

"A birthday party, I guess."

"A birthday party?"

I had my chin propped on a hand, leaning forward over my lap as I looked out at Monty's house on the shore.

“I got invited to one at a friend’s house when I was young. He didn’t just have his family with him; he had all of his friends there to celebrate too. There was a huge cake on the table along with a lot of food, and we all wore pointed hats. We sang for him, clapped... I was incredibly jealous.”

“Have you never had one?”

“My parents were barely home, so I never asked. Things weren’t exactly great between us either, so any party we had probably wouldn’t even have been fun.”

That birthday party had shown me a family unlike my own—one where you could come home to your parents, who’d cook for you and celebrate your birth. That type of family had seemed to be the more common one as well, and so I’d gotten envious. Thinking back, it might have been better if I hadn’t gone to the party at all. I couldn’t be jealous of what I didn’t know.

“What about yours?” I asked at length, shaking off my thoughts.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a book. Its leather cover had faded, grown shiny from how much it’d been handled over the years.

“I was obsessed with this.”

“That’s the one you were searching for, right?”

“Right. It’s a story about a mouse-knight and a human princess traveling the world and looking for something truly beautiful... It’s childish, I know. You can laugh if you want.”

I shook my head.

“It sounds like a wonderful story. So you wanted to be the princess, then?”

Charolles leaned forward, speaking quietly, like someone about to tell an important secret.

“I was much more boyish as a child.”

“Oh, so you wanted to be the knight?”

“I did. Even though he was so little, the mouse-knight defeated these huge monsters and always caught the bad guys, using a tiny magic sword and his

massive imagination. I used to take the sword my dad kept for chopping wood and would happily swing it around, mimicking the knight. I had no shortage of villains either—he and my brothers were all way taller than I was.”

“No wonder you’re more reliable than me.”

“I’m a well-trained knight, after all.” She chuckled, gently stroking the book’s cover and falling into thought. After a moment, she continued, “I read it over and over and over again. I didn’t know how the story ended, though, so I could never get it out of my head. I wanted to know how it’d gone and whether he’d gotten what he was after. Until I knew that, our journey together couldn’t end.”

“Which is why you’ve got to search for the rest.”

Charolles shook her head, though.

“It doesn’t exist.”

“Just because Monty said so? Even he hasn’t read all the books in the world.”

“That’s not it,” she said, lifting her head to reveal a listless smile—the kind of smile worn by someone who had given up. “He wrote it.”

It all fell into place then, and I finally understood. I scratched my cheek, nodding slowly. If the person that’d written the story said it had no ending, then there was no other answer to find. It was such a simple thing that anyone could understand it—if the author had never created it, then yeah, it wouldn’t exist.

“Do coincidences like this really happen, though? You just come along to a village and find the author living there?”

“I came here on purpose. My dad told me he’d gotten this book in a village he stopped in while traveling for work. I didn’t know which village it was, but I did know that couriers note down everywhere they stay in their maps.”

“So...you’ve been using those maps to check each place?”

“I have. In between jobs, of course, at first. Once the world ended up like this, the search went more quickly. It was fortunate that he’d gotten the book from the writer himself and that he was still alive.”

“So that’s why you don’t need it anymore.”

Charolles finally had the answer she'd been obsessed with finding—but it wasn't the answer she'd wanted. She must have been disappointed, bereft...or maybe even relieved.

"Um..." I ventured, "why did it have to be *that* book? Surely there are lots of others?"

"I don't know my actual parents," she told me.

"Could you quit just coming out with all that heavy stuff?" I fired back. "I need time to prepare myself for it first."

She laughed, amused by my sudden plea.

"It's fine," she assured me. "I was brought up with even more love than if they'd been my real parents, and I got along with my siblings as well as anyone does. I did wonder where I'd come from, though. The mouse-knight in the story was also searching for his birthplace, and it felt like I was reading about myself. Like maybe my dream could be fulfilled somehow, even if just in a book. I'd be able to smile and close the book, then sleep soundly, content knowing how it all ended."

I let out a breath of understanding as she planted her hands behind her and leaned back on them to look up at the sky. The moonlight cast floating shadows across her pale throat.

"There's no end to that story, and my role as a courier is over. I haven't even ever fallen in love. At this point, I don't think I care whether tomorrow comes."

The way she was speaking gave off a different impression than her usual attitude. It seemed almost childish, I thought, but soon revised my opinion. Considering how young she still was, it was probably better phrased as acting her age.

"We can't have that," I pointed out. "Nito's looking forward to the festival."

"You're right. We can't afford to make her sad."

Without sitting back upright, she turned her head to look curiously at me.

"Is your world a good place?"

"That's an odd thing to ask."

“If it is, then things must be hard for you. You’re lost in this world with nothing to do while everything ends around you. There’s no hope of saving it either.”

Her voice was firm and carried no tones of despair or anger. She’d simply accepted the fact that the world was ending and spoke about it with no real feeling. Everyone still alive here probably needed that detachment in order to live in this world.

“Things are still fun here, in their own way.”

“Because you’re with Nito?”

I shrugged in place of any real answer. After that, I spaced out for a bit, watching her face. Her long eyelashes quivered slightly and I knew right then that this memory would always be fresh in my mind.

Yet even this conversation with Charolles would someday break down into crystals and fade away like it’d never happened. We were facing each other, but not *looking* at each other, both of us simply spacing out. Neither of us found any answers, nor had any significant thoughts. Time spent just drifting like this was most definitely a necessity in life.

Even so, though the boat wasn’t a rental with a time limit or anything, I knew it was time for us to head back. I picked up the oars and turned the boat around, rowing back to the shore. Charolles said nothing. However pleasant the time you spent was, it ended eventually, and we’d both come to accept that understanding. Despite our reluctance, we didn’t fight against it. We knew we couldn’t keep floating here forever—we had to go back to reality.

When we got back to the jetty, I got out first, mooring the boat. As Charolles stood up to disembark as well, I spoke to her.

“Did you have fun?”

There was a pause before she answered.

“I did, actually. I’d been longing for something like this, a moment that feels like it could have come from a story.”

“I’m just sorry it was me you had to share it with,” I said, holding out a hand

toward her.

She looked steadily at my hand and then took it with a small smile. Her own hand was delicate and soft, and her skin had a slight chill to it. She hopped lightly out onto the jetty.



“You’re a strange one. You really are.”

“Well, I’m an otherworlder, after all.”

“Are all otherworlders like you, then?”

“Maybe. I think there are some weirder than me, at least.”

Silence hung between us for a while.

“I’m glad it was you that I met. You’re a little wonderful.”

“Just a little?”

“Just a little.”

Judging by the smile on her face, Charolles looked like she was having fun, and so I smiled back. *Just a little, huh? I’m not going to complain about that, as long as it gets a smile.*

We stopped to let Monty know we were heading back, before remounting her trike. The two of them needed to have a talk, but now wasn’t the time for it. For now, we needed to head to bed. Our wonderful little night continued for just a bit longer as I decided to entrust our hope to tomorrow.

3

Nito, of course, woke up first. She was the only one of us that’d had a proper night’s sleep, after all. Her bright voice woke me, and I turned over and buried my head back into the pillow, trying to ignore it.

“Keisuke, wake up! We’ve got a busy day today!”

“We should just do the festival tomorrow,” I mumbled through the pillow. “Then we can spend today excited as well.”

“You just want to go back to sleep. If you can make excuses, you can get up. Come on!”

She pulled the pillow out from under me and, in that moment, I discovered what a clam felt when you yanked it from its shell. Her determination and bubbling energy were irrepressible; I was getting no more sleep today, it

seemed. I pulled myself up with a grunt and then climbed out of bed, yawning.

Once I was on my feet, I rubbed my eyes to clear away the tears my yawn had produced. Nito impatiently nudged me into motion. She pushed me forward the whole way as I walked along to the main hall, where I found Charolles already up and dressed, sitting on one of the pews.

The fresh morning air made the memories from the night before feel a little extra embarrassing. I didn't quite know whether to carry on with how things had been going yesterday or to start fresh. Charolles, on the other hand, was apparently unbothered; her expression was the same as ever as she looked up at my arrival.

"That's some impressive bedhead," she said nonchalantly.

"I've always had pretty frizzy hair," I explained as I ran my fingers through it to try and get it back into some semblance of order. "That get it?"

"It's wonderful. You look like a man of the wilds. It might be best not to let people see you like that, though."

"Well, thanks. That's the first time I've gotten such high praise for it," I joked back. "I'll just go have a wash."

I could feel a deadly sharp gaze on me. Turning, I saw Nito staring fixedly at me, a slight frown on her face.

"What's up?" I asked her.

"You two seem closer than yesterday."

Whew, that's some intuition she has. It sent shivers down my spine, in fact.

I went to say that it was nothing, but that didn't really feel right. It wasn't like we'd done anything wrong, so there was no need to lie. All the same, I didn't really want to explain everything either. Just as I'd decided that I didn't want to hide it and would tell her, the door opened and Fago entered. Immediately, Nito gasped and ran for our room.

"What's with her?" Fago asked.

From an outside perspective, it seemed almost like Nito had fled at the sight of her, so even Fago was somewhat bewildered.

“I think you’ll understand soon. Don’t worry about it,” I told her with a rueful smile.

Before I’d even finished speaking, though, Nito came running back—clutching the invitation, of course. She stopped in front of the old woman and held it out to her.

“Fago, take this, please.”

“What’s with all this fuss so early in the morning?” Fago asked, peering at the invitation and reading it over.

After a moment, she smiled. It was the kindest expression I’d seen on her face in the whole time I’d known her.

“Well, isn’t this a pretty picture? Did you paint it?”

Nito nodded several times. The invitation we’d chosen for Fago was the picture of the temple. After all, it was perfect for her, considering she came here every morning.

“I’ve never been given something so fancy before. Thank you,” Fago said softly, taking it.

“Um, will you...join in?” Nito asked.

“Of course I will. There’s nothing big that I can do, but I’ll bring some food.”

Nito nodded, giving a bright smile. I hadn’t thought Fago would refuse, but I’d still been a little nervous. Nito had put everything into making those invitations, and my heart ached imagining what it would do to her if they were refused. I knew that Charolles felt the same way, and we exchanged glances and slight smiles of relief.

This success had gotten me in the mood for delivering the next one right away, but we had our routine of cleaning the temple with Fago to keep. We’d make the place shine, both as thanks for letting us stay and in hopes that today would go well, I decided.

Paula's car was parked in front of the theater, facing away from us as we drove up, the same as yesterday. I hadn't considered it then, but now I realized that this must have meant she'd returned to the theater from the same direction as us. In other words, it was clear that she'd gone to check on Fago at the temple.

I pulled the Kettle in behind Paula's car, and we headed inside. It wasn't just Nito and me today; Charolles had ridden with us too. Her role wasn't just to watch us give the invitations, of course. Later, she'd be carrying supplies that we needed her magic bag for.

Both of them were just inside as we entered. They must have been cleaning. Paula was wearing a handkerchief over her mouth and another over her hair, and she had a broom in her hand. Jill was in the middle of opening a window on the second floor.

"Oh my! What brings all three of you here?" Paula exclaimed, hitching up her usual colorful dress as she came on over.

Jill trotted down the stairs too. I met her eyes as she approached, and she inclined her head slightly. I nodded back. I knew that without Jill's help here, Paula would never accept the invitation. The issue was that we'd had no chance to arrange things beforehand. I'd just have to hope that she could infer what was going on.

Charolles placed a hand on Nito's back. The smaller girl seemed to draw courage from the touch and took a step forward. She looked up at Paula towering above her and then held out the invitation.

"Paula, would you take this?"

"A gift? For me? Oh, Nito, you lady-killer," she said jokingly, taking it and then dropping her gaze to it.

Painted onto it was Fago's shoe workshop—in other words, Paula's home. There was no way that Paula would be able to look at that and not realize what it meant and what emotions Nito had put into it. It truly was a painting full of her earnest feelings.

I waited with a slight amount of hope for Paula's reply. Nito stared up at her

uneasily while I looked on more calmly.

“I’m really happy with this, Nito. Both the picture and the invitation. They’re wonderful,” Paula said, crouching down to meet Nito’s gaze. “But I—”

“Oh, right,” I spoke up, seeing my cue. “We’ve got one for Jill as well.”

The young woman in question jolted in surprise.

“Hey, Nito, you should give Jill hers too,” I prompted.

“Eh, ah, um,” Nito stammered.

“Go on. She’s waiting,” I said, following Charolles’s example and putting my hand on her back.

Nito’s straightforward feelings were wonderful—they were almost blindingly bright to adults mired in their worries. That didn’t guarantee immediate acceptance, though. Sometimes, you had to take a slightly more roundabout approach.

Jill was just as flustered as Nito. Her gaze wouldn’t settle at first, and then she threw me a searching look. I couldn’t let Paula get suspicious, so I just looked evenly back.

“Um, Jill,” Nito called, “this is an invitation to the Lantern Flower Festival tonight.”

Jill floundered for a second before replying.

“Th-Thank you. But I...” she hedged, looking between Nito, Paula, and me.

She flapped her hands around, uncertain, and didn’t immediately take the paper.

The invitation was doubtless a lot for her to process. She wasn’t used to being around people, so taking part in a festival would be difficult for her. Right now, she had a look of near-panic on her face as she tried to decide how to deal with it, rather than just taking it like Paula had.

I wanted Jill to come, both for Paula and Fago’s sake as well as for my own little idea. I had a plan, and I wanted to bring her in on it, but if Paula noticed, she’d never set foot anywhere near the festival.

That left me no choice. I hadn't wanted to do this, but I knew I couldn't let my pride win out here. I waited for the next time Jill was looking at me, and then I winked, just like Paula always did.

I never thought the day would come when I'd give a serious wink to a woman.

Whether I'd managed a proper wink was beside the point. As long as it'd gotten the point across to Jill, it was proper enough. I decided to consider the slight fear in her answering expression as my imagination.

"O-Okay. I'll join in..." she managed, hesitantly taking the invitation.

"Really?!" Nito gushed.

I'd taken a heavy blow, but we'd managed to achieve our goal. Paula's eyes were wide. She knew Jill well, so her shock and sense of unease about the other woman's answer were probably to be expected, but I didn't think she had even an inkling that we were plotting anything.

"Oh, wow," Jill murmured, staring at the invitation.

Nito had painted the theater for Jill. This was where they'd met each other and where the shock of Jill's singing had gained them both a new friend, so it was an important place to both of them.

"Um, Paula, we'd really like it if you would join in as well," Nito said, turning to face Paula again.

The timing was perfect, and so was the courageous look in her eyes. The effect that both together had was amazing. Jill's acceptance had also likely had a strong influence. Paula, still crouched, looked again at the invitation in her hand. She remained silent for a long moment, and we didn't rush her, just stood waiting for her decision.

"If I go, it might ruin the whole thing. I might even end up bawling and running away."

She was probably worried about how things would go with Fago. I was sure that she didn't need to be, though. Fago wouldn't act like she feared—but it'd take a prompt, and a slight push, to help Paula find her resolve. Just as I was about to open my mouth, something tugged at my wrist. Glancing that

direction, I saw that Charolles was shaking her head. At the same moment, Nito beamed at Paula.

“That’s fine. We’ll be with you!”

Paula’s mouth fell open, then her shoulders started to shake, until she finally broke out into laughter. It was hardly a surprising response. Really, it might have been the only fitting response. Even I couldn’t help a weak chuckle.

There was absolutely no logic in what Nito had said. How on earth would that make anything better? I had no idea, but I knew that its absurdity was exactly why Paula could accept the reassurance. If Nito said it, then it must be true. The rest of us had lost that frankness at some point, so Nito’s bright words served to give us courage. Paula wiped away the tears welling up in her eyes and then lowered her head.

“I’ll be counting on you, then,” she said. “I can hardly refuse if you’re willing to go so far.”

I’d never forget the smile that made its way onto Nito’s face then. She clenched her fists in front of her chest and then spun around to face us, cheering, “We did it!”

Now I was sure that Monty would agree as well.

5

“Sorry, but I’ll have to turn you down.”

Things didn’t go anywhere near as well as I’d thought. He *had* complimented the painting of the sun setting over the village, but that was a completely separate matter.

“You...won’t come?” Nito asked.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any interest in those kinds of gatherings.”

Nito was sitting next to me, and I felt her shoulders droop. Her idea had worked on Paula, but not on Monty. A simple, earnest request and bowing of her head wouldn’t get an agreement from him. Before I acted, I locked eyes with Charolles—sitting on Nito’s other side—to check. She’d stopped me

earlier, so I'd wanted to make sure this time, but she just waved me on.

"Monty, would you be interested in hearing some wonderful singing?"

"Oh?" he replied, an intrigued note in his voice.

"Her song's so beautiful that it'll have you hooked by the first note. If the world hadn't ended up like this, this songstress's talent would have never been discovered."

It was carefully indirect, but all true. Jill had come to the theater because of the world falling to ruin. Because there were no more people around to notice her powers, she could finally sing a little as well. She had a talent she would never have allowed people to know otherwise, a beautiful voice only audible due to the world ending. Putting it like that was a bit trite, sure, but I'd used that phrasing exactly because it was the kind of thing that always stirred people's hearts.

Monty snorted.

"Playing on my curiosity, I see?"

"Well, you're always bored at night, right? That won't be the case tonight, at least. I guarantee it."

I had no hope of reading the beady-eyed guinea pig's expression, so I simply swallowed anxiously and waited as Monty stroked his whiskers.

"You would make a good con artist," he said eventually. "They're always using snatches of conversation to find weaknesses and ways to tempt people."

"Is that a compliment?"

"You can take it however you wish," Monty said, picking the invitation up off the table. "I shall prevail upon you after all, young lady, for that song."

I breathed a sigh of relief, and Nito patted me on the knee in thanks. We'd managed to get everyone to agree to come to the festival now.

However, we still had something else to do here—gathering the lantern flowers from around the lake. These strange, glowing, floating flowers were almost the whole point of the Lantern Flower Festival. When we asked Monty about it, he told us they grew on the slope behind his house.

We stood and left, but as we were walking out, I gave a quick excuse about forgetting something and needing to split off. I couldn't think of a better way of doing it. Nito and Charolles both looked pretty doubtfully at me, but they didn't question it too much. Honestly, they'd probably let it slide because my excuse was so transparent. They were both really grown up in that way.

I watched them head off to collect the flowers and then went back into the house. Monty was sitting on the sofa and perusing a book, round glasses perched on his long nose.

"You didn't really tell them that you'd forgotten something so you could double back, did you?"

I hadn't thought he'd hear me through the window. Maybe he was just guessing? I forced a laugh and brushed him off.

"Nah, I'd never do that."

"My eyes might be going, but my ears are still sharp," he retorted. "I heard you loud and clear, and I take back what I said about your talents earlier."

Maybe he really did hear me, then.

I fought back the urge to make a quip and sat back down on the sofa. Monty kept his eyes on the book. At least that made it easier for me to say what I needed to, and it meant that I could leave out most of the preamble.

"I heard about things with Charolles—about how you wrote the story."

"I did. Quite a while ago now."

"Let me just ask straight up. Is there really no continuation?"

"That Charolles girl isn't anyone close to me. I have no obligation to be kind to her, nor to provide her with an honest answer."

That was neither an agreement nor a denial. He took his glasses off and placed them on the open book.

"I do have some familiarity with you, though," he continued. "Allow me to ask something in turn. Why are *you* interested in that story's ending?"

It took me a little time to come up with an answer.

“I’m not, at least not in the ending itself. It’s just that Charolles thinks so highly of it, but now it’s lost to her, and I can’t help but wonder if there’s anything to be done.”

“Wanting to help someone close to you is a laudable goal. But I have no obligation to assist with that, do I? I don’t make a habit of making others feel good.”

His bluntness was very him, and almost refreshing to hear. He picked up his glasses and went to put them back on his nose.

“That story must be important to you.”

He stopped, glasses still held aloft, and directed his beady gaze at me.

“I don’t know anything about working as an author, so I apologize if I’m wrong and sound way too full of myself,” I added.

I’d come to this world, but hadn’t become a hero or a mage or anything. I wasn’t special in any way, and the world was already long dead regardless, with nothing I could do about it. However, if one thing about me had changed since coming here, it was that I’d realized the point in telling people how I felt. It was extremely hard to do, but that just made it all the more worthwhile. Saying how I felt invited them to do the same, and that sharing was what built bonds between people.

“For you, it might be nothing more than a bundle of paper you wrote on long ago. But Charolles lost herself in that story. She saw herself in that mouse-knight. Despite how many years it’s been, she’s carried your story with her, cradling it within her heart. Even as the world fell apart around her, she used the little time she had left to search for the continuation of it.”

I was always nervous when I let out my feelings like this. I always worried about how to get them across, and what the other person would think of me—even whether they’d reject me, rendering it all meaningless. The words I wanted to say were always the unvarnished truth, straight from my heart.

“If there’s someone that treasures a story you created even more than you do, can you really say there is no connection between the two of you? Isn’t it that kind of person that you write for in the first place?”

My ears felt hot. I could feel my blood rushing into my cheeks and all through my face. I didn't know whether I was right or not. I could only hope that I'd get through to him and that my words would ring true.

"You *do* have some obligation to give her an honest answer. She loves the story that you brought into being. So you need to take responsibility for that. If you still call yourself an author, you should show her the entirety of that story."

Monty just closed his book and placed his glasses on top of it.

"You think that I treasure the end of that story and am keeping it to myself?" he asked.

"I don't think it matters."

He looked back at me, puzzled.

"If you have it, show her. If not, write it. You're an author, aren't you?"

He covered his mouth with one small hand. Eventually, a laugh made its way past that barrier. More laughter escaped intermittently, making a sound almost like purring. It seemed like it might go on for a while, but then he took a deep breath and slowly let it out again.

"It's been too long since I've heard something so honest."

"Honest?" I asked after a hesitant pause.

"Like nothing else is," he affirmed. "Very well, I understand what you're trying to say. I'll consider it."

I resisted the urge to ask what he meant. If Monty said he'd think about it, then he would. I'd said everything I'd thought of the night before, anyway. I couldn't say anything more. All I could do was trust that I'd done my best, though I didn't know how it'd turn out. I bowed my head and stood up to leave.

Once I'd stepped outside, I took a deep breath. Thinking back on the conversation, I felt more embarrassed than accomplished. Not to mention, I seemed to be drenched in sweat.

"Keisuke!"

I turned at the sound of my name. The other two were on their way back.

Nito raced over, pouting up at me.

“Why didn’t you come? It was so pretty. There were white flowers everywhere!”

“I got caught up in conversation with Monty. Are those the lantern flowers?”

Nito was carrying a crown made of white flowers. She held it up in front of her face to show it to me.

“Yes, they are. Charolles taught me how to make this!”

“It looks much better than I’d expect from a first attempt. Guess you’re good at flower weaving as well.”

“It seems so,” she answered. “Even I was surprised.”

The sight of Nito proudly puffing her chest out was just so precious that all the tension rushed out of me. Charolles arrived just then, a smile on her lips. Nito suddenly turned her gaze to the flower crown and then held it out to me.

“It’s my greatest work, so you can have it.”

“An honor indeed,” I replied, bending down.

She stretched up ever so slightly and put it on my head. I straightened to give her a proper look at me.

“Does it suit me, then?”

“Hmm... Maybe I should take it back?”

“Hey!”

“Just kidding.”

Nito’s bright laughter filled the air around us, and before we’d realized it, Charolles and I were laughing along with her.

Chapter 6 — Keeping the Scarlet Glow Alive

1

“It’s a little late to be saying so, but maybe we went too far,” Charolles commented.

“I agree, actually.”

We were standing side by side, looking up at the pile of firewood we’d made in the center of the courtyard in front of the temple. We’d used the wood from the stores behind the temple. Unlike household firewood that was split into smaller sections, these were huge, whole logs merely stripped of their bark—probably meant to be used for the festival in question. While Charolles was stronger than she looked due to having some animal traits, it had still been an ordeal to carry them here, even working as a pair.

“Is *this* what you meant by ‘bonfire’?” she asked.

“Well...I’ve never actually made one.”

“I’m noticing a trend here.”

“It’s something all guys want to do if they get the chance.”

We’d stacked the wood into a square, with thinner branches and leaves piled up in the center. We’d put some mana stones—normally used as fuel for our vehicles—in there as well, so I was pretty sure it’d burn well.

“Keisuke, is this the right thickness?” Nito asked.

“Perfect.”

She was cutting vegetables on a long table we’d also fetched out of the storeroom. We’d found three barbecue grills, as well, which were essentially metal boxes on legs. Off to the side sat a collection of fresh meat and vegetables that Charolles had provided, along with a bunch of preserved food from the vault we’d gotten Paula to tell us about earlier in the day. We’d gotten

the preparations for the festival finished, so now all we had left was to wait for everyone to turn up.

I checked my watch to see the time we'd written on the invitations was fast approaching. The sky was darkening steadily—deep blue stretched out above madder red, the two shades blending into a tranquil purple in the middle.

Fago was the first to arrive, carrying something on a tray. I hurried over to help and smelled something sweet.

"What are they?" I asked, gesturing toward the tray. "They smell great."

"Scones. I mixed walnuts and dried fruits into the dough. You can't have a festival without them."

The "scones" were big yellow puffs and *looked* pillowy soft. I guessed that they were some regional variation on steamed buns. I took the tray and found that the air above it felt warm, as if they were freshly baked. That made me want to pick one up and just dig into it. Swallowing the drool pooling in my mouth before it could escape, I put the tray down on one of the tables.

Fago took one glance at our bonfire and gave me a flat look.

"Are you trying to burn down the temple?"

Yeah, guess it was too big, I thought with chagrin.

While I was giving our excuses to Fago, Monty came up the hill. Surprisingly, he was pushing a bike. He patted the saddle when he saw the surprise on my face.

"It's safer than a car and easy to park. Makes a great vehicle, at least until you run up against a hill."

He stopped the bike and opened the wooden box on its luggage rack, pulling out a fish that looked something like a trout.

"I caught this earlier. You can do what you like with it."

"Wow, thank you... Were you looking forward to this?"

The fish was obviously fresh, almost straight from the water. He must have gone out onto the lake for it. It was clearly a gift he'd put some effort into.

“It’s a matter of courtesy,” he said, stroking his whiskers. “It has nothing to do with any anticipation on my part.”

“Hmph,” Fago interrupted. “You’ve gotten sulkier as the years have gone by.”

“Oh my, it’s you. Here I’d thought you were just a pile of dried vegetables. I’m impressed you’re still clinging to life, but should you really be up and about? Don’t humans suffer with the years?”

“Better than ending up a fuzzy mop,” she retorted.

I took a step back as they let their insults fly. A full-on war had broken out between them, or so it seemed, and I didn’t want to get involved.

Instead, I took the fish and laid it on a chopping board. Nito had been chopping vegetables nearby, and she stopped to look at it with shining eyes. I doubted she’d had much chance to eat fresh fish in her life, and I could understand the almost-drooling anticipation on her face, but I’d rather have seen her looking at it like that after I’d seasoned and cooked it.

Considering the size of the fish, I reasoned that roasting it whole was probably best. It would have been great roasted along with the veggies, but unfortunately, I didn’t have any miso. While I was lost in thought mulling over my options, Charolles elbowed me.

“I know, no sashimi,” I commented.

“I didn’t say anything,” she replied, then added, “Everyone’s here.”

I followed her pointing finger to see Paula and Jill’s car pull in. It stopped and the two of them got out. Jill looked nervous, but Paula’s expression was even stiffer. Still, they didn’t just stand there; they started walking over.

Fago had been talking with Monty, but she’d stopped when they arrived and was now staring silently at Paula. There wasn’t a word spoken in the courtyard, and a strange tension hung over the entire area.

“You’re here!” I called as cheerily as I could, then waved and trotted over to them.

“I’m gonna die,” Paula murmured.

“Your face’ll get stuck like that, you know. Come on, smile.”

She paused, going still for a moment.

“Nope,” she said, pivoting around. “I’m going home. I can’t do this.”

“It’s okay. It’ll go fine,” I assured her.

“How can you be so sure?” she retorted, then groaned, “I just know it’s gonna be awful. What face is she making?”

I looked over and saw Fago talking to Nito; the girl must have seen the need to offer some encouragement.

“She’s smiling. Seems pretty happy, to be honest.”

“That’s obviously a lie, but thank you.”

Paula turned her head away, biting a fingernail. Just getting them in the same place wouldn’t solve things. I’d known that. The thing that would change the situation was Jill’s singing. I moved next to her as she looked between Paula and Fago with worry, and then spoke quietly to her.

“Are you okay?”

I’d been focused on Paula, but Jill was clearly nervous as well. Her lips were pale and her body was trembling slightly.

“I-I’m okay,” she answered. “Sorry, um, so...”

“You’re right. I want you to sing here.”

I’d been pretty sure that she’d cottoned on when we gave her the invitation, and given her current nervousness, it certainly seemed like she had. She screwed her eyes shut and nodded in silent agreement. All the same, I was worried about her, enough that I wanted to call the whole thing off. That’s how nervous she seemed.

“I...I asked for this, and thanks to you, Paula and her mother are finally in the same place... So...I’ll do what I can.”

Along with the determination that’d crept into her voice, her expression suddenly firmed with resolve. I stopped worrying; it would have only disrespected her resolution. If she’d decided she’d do it, then I’d believe in her.

“But, um,” she murmured, moving closer, “what feelings should I use?”

That was indeed the question.

“A song of hope,” I said softly. “A song of keeping others in your heart, of believing in tomorrow and trusting that things will be okay. Just a slight push on the back.”

“Hope” was probably too abstract of a direction to give her, but it fit. The feelings, the thoughts...everything we really needed for this was contained in those four letters. Jill simply nodded and put a hand to her chest, closing her eyes, as if to make sure her emotions were just right.

Then the air seemed to change. My skin prickled and went numb. A sense of anticipation filled the whole courtyard. I felt like I should greet everyone and open the festivities. Maybe light the fire and stand with it behind me to introduce Jill and get everyone ready to listen. I’d thought of all sorts of ideas earlier, but it was all for nothing in the end. The moment she sang her first note, we were all taken in.

It was a quiet song, with no accompaniment. No spotlight shone on her, and no audience-filled stands rose up around her. This wasn’t the theater, and she wasn’t on stage. It wasn’t the performance she’d dreamed of—but it was one meant for someone important to her, and for that woman’s mother, and she sang to us of her own will. Her voice was kind and warm, and it whispered directly to our hearts. It started echoing louder, her feelings bearing down against our chests. Her heart-wrenching soprano held within it all her adoration and well-wishes for the person most important to her in the world. Hers was a song of hope—of lifting your head to look for tomorrow.

I slowly moved away, crossing the courtyard while everyone was listening to Jill sing. I came up next to Nito and whispered into her ear. She nodded vigorously and ran over to Paula, taking her hand. Meanwhile, I picked my moment and moved over to Fago. Monty acknowledged me with a look and then seemed to understand what was going on and tactfully moved away. I couldn’t help but marvel at his intuition.

“It’s a good song, right?”

“Yes...it is,” Fago answered, looking at me in surprise; apparently, she’d been listening so raptly that she hadn’t noticed me come over.

The sun had sunk behind the mountains, and it was getting darker out. The sky was still lit, though, tinted a light blue by the moon that hung above us, alone in the sky but shining as brightly as any star. Looking out over that scenery, with Jill's singing echoing around us, it felt like our hearts were just that little bit more open.

"Fago, I want to ask you again." She was looking at Jill, listening to that song of hope, but also to me, just a little. "This doesn't go further... It's just between us. Do you really not want to see Paula? You don't want to talk to her, even though you're right here in the same place?"

It was an obvious question, you might say. It didn't need asking, perhaps. But sometimes, you had to put those obvious questions into words. Just saying it out loud might be enough to save someone.

Fago let out a breath, before replying quietly.

"Of course I do. That's my child. Man or woman changes nothing. I just realized it far too late."

I tapped her on the shoulder, then pointed behind us. She turned around, her eyes went wide, and then she looked back at me. I heard her tut, but I'd happily take that hit.

"You came," I said.

Paula was standing there, having been quietly pulled over by Nito. Fago looked up at Paula, simultaneously frowning and letting out a rueful laugh.

"You look awful. Tears everywhere."

Paula's purple eyeshadow was running in tracks down her face, carried by her tears. She sobbed, stepping forward.

"Mama... I'm so sorry. I couldn't be the son you wanted. I turned out like this instead... I always wanted to say sorry."

"Don't be stupid," Fago said, embracing her daughter's large frame and gently patting her on the back as if soothing a child.

"You're no son of mine," she added. "You're my wonderful daughter."

Paula's sobs intensified as she fell to her knees, clinging to Fago. I tugged at

Nito's hand, leading her away. They'd be all right on their own now, and we'd just be in the way. Nito was sniffing, and I couldn't say that I wasn't as well.

Jill's song ended and Nito broke into applause, eyes still teary. One by one, the rest of us joined in, and while we might not have held a candle to a full auditorium, Jill's face reddened as she lowered her head in several bows, equal parts shy and happy.

2

The curtain of night had well and truly been drawn over the sky now, so we lit the bonfire. It burned just as fiercely as Charolles and I had predicted, but the vibrant energy of it made up for the small number of people we had, so it ended up being fine. We ate our feast of fried meat, fish, and scones, except Monty, who only ate the vegetables. Everyone was cheerful and joking around with each other. There might not have been many of us, but there was no shortage of laughter.

"Listen here, Kei! Mama said she'd make me heels! As many pairs as I like! There's not a better mama in the world!"

"Would you be quiet?!"

"What? I'm happy!"

It was shocking how much better their relationship had gotten. *They fought so hard to avoid this meeting, but now look at them.* Neither Nito nor I were about to complain, though; we were all smiles.

"Thank you, Kei. It's all because of you."

"Nito, Charolles, and Jill all helped too."

"Then we need to thank all of them too! Come on, mama!"

"Don't pull the elderly around like that!"

The two of them headed toward the bonfire, hand in hand. Jill and Nito were over there, and I could hear their cheery conversation from where I was standing.

“I owe you an apology,” Monty said, coming over as I was grilling some fish. “I didn’t actually expect anything.”

“From the festival? Or from the song?”

“From either, but more the latter. If I had to describe that song, as an author...I’d call it astonishing.”

I burst out into laughter. He was right, though—it *had* been astonishing. Jill’s song lightened a heavy heart. It let you believe that there was light, even in the darkest night. Her song held hope inside it.

“There’s a box on my bike’s luggage rack,” he said.

“Hang on, isn’t that what the fish was in?”

“Well, it might smell a tad, but that’s a minor detail. It’s yours.”

“I wish you’d have given that more thought... Wait, that box—”

“Is the one I showed you, yes. I’ve unlocked it.”

“The one with your hope inside?”

“Indeed. My hope is bound up in paper, though. I’ll die not long from now, and, assuming there is some hereafter, I wanted to give the rest of that story to my daughter. It’s by waiting for that day that I’ve lived this long.” He laughed at himself, but there was no shame in what he’d said.

“It was your hope because it meant you could die at any point?” I asked.

“If I could believe I’d see her again, it would be just like going out for a ride on my bike.”

I deflated at his joking tone. I was still too uptight to joke about a person’s death like that. With the world in the state it was, though, people had to find their own hope in order to survive. What form that took and what desire sustained it varied from person to person, and I couldn’t judge that.

“I wrote the story for her. We made it into a book together, bit by bit. I promised to finish it before she died, but I couldn’t. Afterward, it was too painful to look at it, so I let it go.”

That must have been the copy that Charolles had.

“Why didn’t you complete it?” I asked. “If you’d written the whole thing, I mean.”

“I hadn’t written the last page. The idea of it was too lonely. There are stories you don’t want to let end, right?”

Realizing just how important it was to him, I felt guilty for how self-important I’d been about it yesterday. I opened my mouth, but he raised a hand to stop me.

“I’m grateful. Your upfront, honest words made me remember the true meaning of my job. So, before I meet my maker, I’ve written that single page and made a wonderful story.”

He gently patted my shoulder.

“Your laughter and her song have taught me to believe again—that, even ruined, the world is a beautiful place. The box is yours. Do with it as you wish.”

He made to leave after that, but I called after him.

“You don’t want to give it to her yourself?”

“I’m not that unrefined. An unexpected gift will be far better coming from you,” he said, answering just like I’d have expected of an author.

3

Charolles was standing a little ways off to the side, in a quieter spot next to the temple doors. As I approached, I noticed that her expression looked slightly colder than usual, but I already knew that it wasn’t from displeasure.

“Having fun?” I asked.

“Lots. It’s been quite a while since I’ve been to such a vibrant gathering,” she answered.

We stood side by side just looking out across the courtyard for a moment. The light of the huge bonfire was staving off the dark of night, bathing the space in its warm glow. Paula was dancing, her skirt flaring in time with Jill’s bright singing. Nito was clapping along, while Fago and Monty were laughing as they

cheerfully heckled the group. Everyone's shadows were lengthening across the ground.

"I actually have a request for you," I admitted.

"Again? Well, I'll at least hear you out."

"I want you to deliver something."

Another stretch of quiet followed my statement.

"Didn't I say that there was no more use for couriers?" she asked at length.

"Didn't you also say you'd hear me out?"

She raised her hands in concession and fell silent, looking back at me expectantly.

"It's a request for Jill as well, though I haven't gotten her to agree to it yet."

I pulled my phone from my pocket. It was a small oblong device. Or, depending on how you looked at it, a tiny box.

"I'm pretty sure there are other survivors in pockets here and there, just like us. They might be alone, though, and suffering, with no hope for tomorrow. What people like us need is a box of hope."

I looked down at the phone in my hand. It was irreplaceable, one of the few things I had that let me be certain my last world had really existed. Even then, it *had* to be better used helping other people than just serving my own sentimentality. I was fine now; I didn't need it anymore.

"This box is a tool from my world. It will record clear audio and play it back over and over. I want you to use it to record lots of Jill's singing—songs that will give people the push they need to keep going, that will soothe their hearts and give them hope," I said, offering it to Charolles. "I want you to take this and use it to deliver those songs to the people still living in this world, so that they can smile and laugh again."

Everyone's laughter echoed around us, lingering as my words faded. The world was dead. There was no doubt about that, and everyone in it had lost people precious to them, longed and searched for things they would never find. We all had nights when we weren't sure we'd ever see the dawn. Yet all of us

here tonight were sharing this moment with each other. All of us were laughing and celebrating together. If there was still any hope in this world, here it was.

Charolles didn't spare a glance for the phone. She just looked straight back at me, her eyes reflecting the cheerful scarlet of the fire as she held my gaze.

"You're a real dreamer," she said eventually.

"Too much of one?" I asked.

"Much too much," she said. "Are you sure? It's important to you, isn't it?"

"That's why I'm hiring you for the job. I'm the client, the goods are this box of hope, and the addressee... That's the people of the world. See, you've got plenty to do," I laughed.

Will this work? I wondered to myself. Charolles gave a bemused shrug and then took the phone from my hand.

"This is the first time I've been given an assignment as ludicrous as delivering hope."

"I guess you're not a fan of sentimental stuff like that, then. I just thought it might be good."

Charolles smiled at me, though, her face lit by the warm flames of the festival bonfire. It was a soft, gentle, and gorgeous smile.



“No...I love sentimental things.”

A shiver ran down my spine, and my legs felt suddenly unsteady. I almost couldn't keep standing. I'd been somewhat embarrassed by my phrasing to start with, and now, in the face of her answering me like that, it was almost too much—I had to wrestle down the urge to cry out.

“Um, well, you know,” I stammered instead, “we should go talk to Jill, um, together. We need to record those songs before you can deliver them, after all.”

“Why are you so flustered all of a sudden?”

“I'm not,” I insisted. “Yeah, not flustered at all.”

“I suppose you *are* just that little bit weird.” She chuckled.

There was nothing I could do but throw my hands up in surrender and try for a change of topic. I stood there for a moment desperately trying to think of one.

“Oh, right,” I managed eventually. “About your pay.”

“Right. This is a massive job, so can I expect a commensurate reward?”

“Yes. I already have it prepared. An utterly unique treasure.”

“And where are you keeping such a wonderful thing?”

“It's inside a box right now... Though it's a bit fishy-smelling.”

“I don't have the slightest idea what you mean.”

I wasn't sure whether to hand it over now or wait so I could at least wash off the outside first. As I was worrying about that, Nito ran up. She took Charolles's hand and pulled at it.

“Charolles, can we have the lantern flowers?!”

“Of course. The two of us picked so many, after all.”

There was no resisting Nito's eager smile. Charolles and I exchanged glances and gave each other a nod, mutually deciding to leave the grown-up negotiations for later and just enjoy ourselves for now. Then Charolles moved over to the bonfire and deposited a veritable mountain of lantern flowers in

front of it from her magic bag. Nito, following Fago's instructions, picked one of them up and then softly tossed it into the fire.

"W-Wooooow!"

We all looked up at the flare of light as the flower caught fire. Its petals shone scarlet as they burned, floating up into the sky and then scattering outward. The momentary glittering as they dissipated looked like dozens of red shooting stars falling through the night sky.

After that, everyone else offered up their own flowers in turn: Fago, then Paula, then Jill, then Monty, then Charolles, and then finally me. Each flower sparkled as it burned, sending countless shards of light dancing through the air.

As my flower's sparks faded, I whispered something into Nito's ear. She whipped her head around in surprise, shaking it and saying, "We can't do that!" Despite her claim, though, a gleam of curiosity lit up her eyes. So I gathered up a mound of the flowers in both hands and then passed it to her. She frowned at me, but then mumbled out an excuse along the lines of, "You've given them to me now, so I've got no choice, but *you're* the one who wanted to do this," as she turned and cast them all into the fire at once.

They immediately burst into brilliant flames, billowing up into the sky and drifting back down like falling snowflakes, and Nito let out a shout of joy that echoed through the courtyard. We stood there next to each other, watching them drift.

Neither of us will ever forget this, I thought to myself. It was a stronger memory than any other, and it would always keep shining. I believed that deep in my heart. Even if the world ended with the dawn, that moment would live on.

4

I woke up during the night, probably due to the leftover excitement from the Lantern Flower Festival. The adults had quickly spotted the wine I'd given as an offering to the saint, and all of them—particularly Paula—had indulged in some drinks, making the festival more boisterous both figuratively and literally. Even

I'd been dragged into it; Paula had pulled me off the sidelines to dance with her. Fago had danced with Monty, and Nito with Charolles, and they'd all enjoyed themselves, but for me, anxiety had won out over enjoyment.

I rubbed my eyes and pulled myself up, then glanced to the side and found Nito wasn't in her bed. Out from under the covers I got, heading into the corridor. Since I'd already given the phone to Charolles, I didn't have a light source, so I had to rely on the moonlight shining in through the windows as I made my way to the main hall. When I opened the door, I found Nito sitting on the front pew, painting a picture of the saint by lantern light. I stood in the doorway for a moment, surveying the scene before me.

"Why are you up so late?" I asked eventually.

"Oh, Keisuke. Did I wake you?"

Her voice was clear, so I supposed she just hadn't been sleepy.

"I just couldn't sleep," I told her, walking over and sitting at her side.

For a while, the only sound in the room was Nito's paintbrush rasping over the paper. The paints she used for her watercolors were different from the tube paints I'd seen her use before. She had a shallow metal box lined with small rectangular divots, each one occupied by a different color of paint. A gap running down the middle of the box held two familiar bullets.

"The Lantern Flower Festival was fun," she said, somewhat softly.

"It sure was. I'm glad we did it," I told her. "Thank you, Nito."

She didn't say anything at first; I just waited.

"I should be the one thanking you. I wasn't all that helpful."

I shook my head.

"We were only able to do it at all because you'd said you wanted to. Suggesting something is an indispensable role in making it happen. Also, if it weren't for your invitations, I don't think we could have gotten everyone here."

Nito paused again. Silence hung between us for several long moments.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," she said eventually, her voice barely more

than a murmur. “But you put in all kinds of effort when I wasn’t watching, didn’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know about that.”

“You can’t get out of it that easily. You need to tell me the whole story later.”

Her words had a forceful tone to them that told me any excuses I made would do me no good. Being seen through so thoroughly wasn’t the nicest of feelings. *Weird, I haven’t actually done anything wrong...*

“It’s a beautiful village,” she said.

“It is,” I agreed.

“Fago, Paula, Jill, Monty...and Charolles, they’re all such wonderful people.”

“I think so too.”

“But we have to leave them again.”

Maybe I should suggest we stay. We had our goals—Nito was searching for her Golden Sea, and I was searching for the big man in black—but we didn’t know if we’d ever actually *find* what we were looking for. No one would have blamed us for spending some more time in this comfortable village. Even then, Nito had said that we *had* to leave. She’d made the decision to forge on ahead without stopping.

“It’s lonely, isn’t it?”

“Yes...it is...” she answered, the tail end of her sentence wavering; her breath grew harsher and harsher, before it eventually gave way to muffled sobs.

I looked straight up at the statue. Fago had come here every day and prayed, and that prayer had come true. I might not have really ever done so before, and I couldn’t come here every day like she had, but I wanted to pray as well. It might have been an all-too-selfish prayer, but that didn’t matter to me. I just wanted Nito to never be left alone, to always be able to smile, to be happy.

That’s the only prayer I have, I murmured mentally, *so...please.*

Nito dried her eyes on her sleeve and sniffled.

“Keisuke, you danced with Paula earlier,” she said.

“Don’t remind me. It was intense. I still need some time to come to terms with it.”

Nito laughed, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“I was a little jealous of Paula,” she said.

Well, there’s only one thing to do here, I thought, and leaped to my feet, offering a hand to her.

“May I have this dance, my lady?”

I really didn’t look the part of the charming prince, but that didn’t matter. Nito was the only one that could see me. Her eyes widened, but she smiled and gave a slightly choked, “You may,” as she stood and took my hand.

We stepped in close and began to sway. The only music we had was Nito’s off-key humming—amusingly enough, it was a pop song from Japan—and neither of us could dance at all, really. We were out of time with the music, staggering and stepping on each other’s feet. You could hardly have even called it dancing, but Nito still had a smile on her lips, so I was happy.



We danced together in the dim lantern light, watched over only by the saint's statue.

Though putting it that way felt a bit like putting on airs.

[Keisuke's Notes] Couriers

You might think they're just delivery people, but they have magic 4D bags and are certified by the government, so maybe it's a much more impressive job than that. Though with the clients and addressees all having disappeared from this world, it's probably a much harder one as well.

Curtain Call — Forget-Me-Not

Suddenly, my vision cleared, almost like I'd stepped across some invisible boundary.

The rain pounding at the windshield had stopped, and the wipers had shucked off the remaining film of water to reveal a bright blue sky. The sky had been full of dark clouds all morning, but they'd scattered right before my eyes, melting away like smoke. Nito and I were both taken aback by the abrupt change in weather.

Two days had passed since the Lantern Flower Festival. We'd used a lot of that time tidying everything away, packing up the food we'd been given, and then saying our farewells to everyone. When the time finally came to leave, we'd still been reluctant, so we'd ended up spending the rest of that day enjoying tea and talking.

Then, once we'd finally resolved ourselves to depart, the morning had opened with heavy rain. Fago and the others had all come to the temple to see us off, and we'd headed out through the downpour. Unable to see much through the sheets of rain, we'd just traveled in a slow, straight line from the village. It had suddenly stopped not long into the journey, though. The leaden clouds had vanished and daylight had come pouring in through the windshield, and now that the sky had cleared, we could finally see the road in front of us.

We were at a crossroads with a sign standing at the side of it. This was the place where I'd first met Charolles. I stopped at the side of the road and climbed out. The trike following us stopped as well. Charolles got out and walked over, shaking the water from her cape.

"That cleared up quick," I commented.

"It did, thankfully."

"Keisuke, can I put it here?" Nito asked, carrying the atlas and nodding toward the Kettle's hood.

“Hold on. We don’t want it getting wet,” I said, pulling a tarp out of my backpack and using it to cover the hood.

She carefully placed the atlas down on top of the tarp, opening it. The three of us crowded around it and looked down at the open pages.

“Are you sure we can have this?” I asked. “You’ll need it if you’re carrying on with your job.”

Charolles shook her head.

“I’m not delivering things to someone in a certain location. Besides, I’ve lived my whole life relying on maps—getting lost for a while sounds like fun.”

“Oooh...” Nito murmured.

Please don’t be a bad influence on her, I thought in Charolles’s direction. *Also, Nito, stop getting influenced so easily.*

“Still, though, perhaps I’ll follow the route you two took here. That sounds like a good way to meet people, doesn’t it?”

“I think that’s a great idea!” Nito exclaimed, her head bobbing up and down in an energetic nod.

“Let them know we’re doing well too, if you would,” I added.

“You need to go to Barcia first, then! And to Vandyke. Also, um, um...” Nito’s ears were vibrating with joy as she flipped through the atlas. “Here it is! Charolles, there’s a witch here!”

“Oh, there is? I’d like to meet her, then.”

“But her real name is Olympia, and...”

Nito cheerfully regaled Charolles with tales of our journey before we’d come to the village, and Charolles just leaned in, nodding along with a smile as she listened. While they were occupied, I rifled through my bag to find the lantern charger. When Nito finally wound down, Charolles readjusted the cords holding her cape on.

We knew without saying anything that our farewell was approaching. There wasn’t any visual cue, just a sense of the inevitable welling within us as our

reluctance to part tightened our chests. It was the same feeling as when we'd parted with Fago, Paula, Jill, and Monty that morning.

"This is used to recharge the phone," I said to Charolles, holding out the lantern. "I'll teach you how to use it."

"I don't need it," she answered.

"You don't need it...? But the battery will run out eventually."

"It will last longer if I keep it in my bag when I'm not using it, right?"

"Well, that's true," I admitted reluctantly, pursing my lips.

She laughed at me.

"Besides, when it does run out, I'll come to see you both again."

"All right, I give," I said, raising my hands in surrender.

There was nothing I could do against a line like that. In this world of goodbyes, that promise was a spark of warmth. Charolles and I both knew we might never see each other again, and yet Charolles had still promised that we would.

"We'll see you again, Charolles..." Nito said, tears welling in her eyes.

"Of course. Let's have another meal together some time," Charolles replied.

"We will!"

Charolles gently patted Nito's head and then turned to me. Partings weren't something you ever got used to. I'd always thought there had to be a set of perfect words for saying goodbye, but that was no more than an illusion. Whatever words you prepared, and no matter how many, they would never carry all your feelings across to the other person. Therefore, all you really needed was one simple phrase.

"See you tomorrow, then," I told her.

She gave a rueful laugh. I was sure she was going to call me weird again, but she didn't.

"Indeed. See you tomorrow," she said with a nod, heading back to her bike.

She didn't turn back again, just drove away down the road we'd taken on our way into the village. She gradually became a blue speck in the distance, and then eventually I couldn't even make out the color. Nito and I stood there for a while. I heard a snuffle and thought she might be crying, but when I turned to look—while she did have a reddened nose—the expression on her face was a smile.

People say life is made up of goodbyes. However important a memory is, it will one day vanish. I'd understood that for a long time. Yet we still conversed, spent our time with each other, and laughed together. The accumulated time we'd shared was not a sad thing.

We stood at a fork in the road, two paths stretching on without end to the left and right. We didn't know what or who was waiting for us along those roads. What we did know was that we had our supplies on the Kettle and that we'd go as far as we could, searching for that which was precious to us as the cycle of meetings and partings repeated, collecting our memories in the sketchbook as we lived out our days in this ruined world with our wheeled box of hope. Someday we'd look back and see our tire tracks showing the path we'd traveled, and that path would be the tale of our journey.

"We should head off too, Keisuke. Where shall we go next?!"

"We'll have fun wherever we go," I answered.

We met each other's gaze, then turned to look at the maps.

Fin.

[Keisuke's Notes] The Man in Black

He was the first person I met in this world. I thought that he might have some idea of how to get home, or why I'd come to this world, and I used that hope to keep myself going as I searched for him. I don't feel as strongly about it anymore, though. I've found something even more wonderful instead.

Afterword

Everyone has one or two things that they're good at, and even an apparently dull person can have a surprising skill. Some people will have a proud expression as they show off that skill, while others will have an apologetic modesty about them, depending on their disposition. Invariably, though, it's the modest people who are more well-liked.

That's one of the annoying things about people. You've done the same thing either way, but if you're proud of it and let that show, they'll view it in a lesser light. So you end up internally proud even as you wave it off as "nothing special." As the observer, you can give a bit of praise—if an act is impressive, you can reassure someone who's proud of achieving it that they *should* be. Offering that praise makes you both happy. Then again, I suppose that not being able to do that freely is just one of the idiosyncrasies of people's emotions. People have their particular skill, yet they always brush off any praise for it, hiding the fact that they even want the praise at all. You could think of that as a Japanese virtue, I suppose, but I'm not sure that holds true anymore. Doesn't it ever come full circle and end up irritating?

"That's really something."

"Oh, no no, not at all."

"Seriously, it's great."

"No no no, it's nothing, really."

When people that want to offer praise are refuted over and over, they won't want to do so anymore. There's no real certainty that the person was always so humble, though. Maybe they were more honest about their pride in the past, but then met someone bitter that didn't want to give that praise. Perhaps that'd happened several times and thus they'd eventually decided to humble themselves, convinced that they could then avoid the discomfort of being denied praise.

There *are* people that are content in being modest, of course, so when someone has a little pride in themselves, they end up being shouted down with comments about making a big deal, getting carried away, and exaggerating their abilities. We can't forget, though, that those people with some pride in themselves haven't done anything wrong. The only thing wrong is that the people around them can't see what they did to earn that pride. Don't you think it's strange to tell a person they should just shut up and sit down after they've worked so hard to be able to stand tall like that?

There will always be people that complain. There's no avoiding that, and they do have a right to say what they want to. But I want people to know that they don't have to just nod along and fit themselves into the boxes that other people create.

"Look, aren't they great? Is complaining the only thing you're good at?"

That's what I want to say to them. And yet the people that complain are proud of that skill; you could aptly call that kind of pride putting yourself on a pedestal.

Everyone, you should do your best to avoid being a person whose skill is in complaining. If you see someone proudly doing what they love, should you not praise them? That way, when you're proud, someone will praise you. Modesty is something that should itself be used in moderation, and being honest is important.

Think back. When you were ten, were you modest about being praised? However people are as adults, they were more honest as children. And yet as the years go by, these things become more difficult. You can't give an apology, despite wanting to. You can't admit when you want to do something. You hold yourself back, even if there's something you badly want. Eventually, even the question of whether you'll eat the candy in front of you becomes a source of real conflict with yourself. You could eat it without issue, but making that choice has gotten much harder, so even growing up isn't all good.

Adults know more than children. After all, they've lived longer. But what often gets misunderstood is that whether that extra knowledge actually makes you *wiser* is another matter. Knowledge doesn't necessarily equate to wisdom.

There are some children that are wiser than adults, and they can do things even the adults around them think are difficult as if they were nothing.

Now, our story this time begins in a car on a mountain road on the outskirts of a certain country. The roof is loaded down with luggage, so each bump in the road makes the car shake from side to side. Sitting in the driver's seat is a young man midway between adulthood and childhood. He's, say, seventeen or eighteen. He's obviously driving without a license, but those rules don't exist in this world, so that's fine. Regardless, this otherworld is already in ruins. As he drives, the young man turns toward the back seat and speaks.

"Man, I wish we had a map. Then we wouldn't be lost..."

So, how was volume two of *Goodbye Otherworld, See You Tomorrow*?

I have a cushion ready here for the people that prefer to read the afterwords first. As to why I started off with an anecdote out of nowhere... You're quite right, it's because I have six pages to use for the afterword this time.

Hi there, I'm Kazamidori.

The appeal behind writing is being able to get into your reader's head. In every piece of writing, there are things that the author planned all along, and things that they did not, and the people that have read this far into the afterword are probably thinking, "That's a good point," or, "When did the skit start?" or even, "The author's just after some praise."

So, what was the author's plan this time? Half of it is just that: when you take an anecdote that far, it creates an atmosphere where the reader thinks, "I suppose I can give a few words of praise." The other half is that I couldn't think of anything to fill six pages with. I know how to write a story, but writing an afterword is something I still haven't quite mastered. So I started the afterword with that joking little anecdote, though I do think a lot of it applies to this story.

Is this even an afterword? Well, I'm not quite sure myself. To wrap things up, I'll do the acknowledgments.

I caused my editor Tanabe-san a lot of hassle with this volume. The plotting stage ended up going back and forth because I wasn't sure which way to take

the story, and I ultimately went over the deadline *and* the word count. Tanabe-san's perseverance and sharp insight is the reason I managed to get this far.

My illustrator Nimoshi-san drew illustrations that were utterly filled with emotion, giving a beautiful glimpse into the world and the characters' emotions.

This book is the result of many people's work, including the proofreaders and designers, and I want to take the time here to offer thanks to them all.

To you readers, I hope that this story will be a good journey and I say to you all, hoping we can someday meet again: see you tomorrow.

Kazamidori, May 2020



“What a coincidence...”

Goodbye
Otherworld,
See You
Tomorrow

The Traveled Path
and the Box of Hope

II

Charolles

A beastwoman born to a long-standing family of couriers. She's traveling the ruined world searching for a single book.

“Good evening...”

Keisuke

A modern high schooler who suddenly found himself in a desolate new world one day. He's joined by Nito, a girl he met on his travels, on a meandering journey, both of them in search of something.

“Really?!”

“As thanks
for the
meal.”



*Goodbye Otherworld, See you Tomorrow.
The Traveled Path and the Box of Hope*

“Where did you find her?”

“Ah, well, I just happened across her.”

Just as we were getting into a proper conversation, I heard someone clear their throat. I turned around and saw Nito sitting inside the library, reading her book as if nothing had happened.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine. My throat was just a little dry.”

Nito

A half-elf girl with a talent for painting. She’s traveling with Keisuke to search for the Golden Sea, which was painted in the notebook her mother gave her as an heirloom, but...





“Is your world a good place?”

“That’s an odd thing to ask.”

“If it is, then things must be hard for you. You’re lost in this world with nothing to do while everything ends around you. There’s no hope of saving it either.”

“Things are still fun here, in their own way.”

“Because you’re with Nito?”

I shrugged in place of any real answer.

Goodbye Otherworld,

Author
Kazamidori

Illust
Nimoshi

See You Tomorrow

III

The Traveled Path
and the Box of Hope





“What a coincidence...”

Goodbye
Otherworld,
See You
Tomorrow

The Traveled Path
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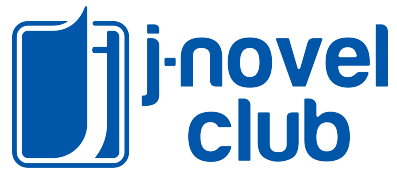
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Goodbye Otherworld, See You Tomorrow: Volume 2

by Kazamidori

Translated by MPT

Edited by RB Rheanan

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